

THE MARSTONS
COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS.

VOL. 971.

THE MARSTONS BY HAMILTON AÏDÉ.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

THE MARS TONS

GOIA NOVETON

BY

R R I T HAMILTON (VIDEL O R S)

AUTHOR OF "RITA" "GARR OF (ARLTON"

COLLECTED EDITION

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL II

LEIPZIG

BEERHARDT TACONITZ

1868

The A. C. of the University of Leipzig

THE MARSTONS.

A NOVEL.

BY

HAMILTON AÏDÉ,

AUTHOR OF "RITA," "CARR OF CARRLYON,"

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1868.

The Right of Translation is reserved.

THE MARSTONS.

CONFESSIONS

OF VOLUMES II

BY

HAMILTON AID.

Page

1	CHAPTER I. A LITTLE OF THE HISTORY OF THE MARSTONS.
10	II. The first of the Marstons.
14	III. A little of the history of the Marstons.
41	IV. The first of the Marstons.
46	V. The first of the Marstons.
62	VI. The first of the Marstons.
66	VII. The first of the Marstons.
78	VIII. The first of the Marstons.
80	IX. The first of the Marstons.
88	X. The first of the Marstons.
90	XI. The first of the Marstons.
92	XII. The first of the Marstons.
94	XIII. The first of the Marstons.
96	XIV. The first of the Marstons.
98	XV. The first of the Marstons.
100	XVI. The first of the Marstons.
102	XVII. The first of the Marstons.
104	XVIII. The first of the Marstons.
106	XIX. The first of the Marstons.
108	XX. The first of the Marstons.
110	XXI. The first of the Marstons.
112	XXII. The first of the Marstons.
114	XXIII. The first of the Marstons.
116	XXIV. The first of the Marstons.
118	XXV. The first of the Marstons.
120	XXVI. The first of the Marstons.
122	XXVII. The first of the Marstons.
124	XXVIII. The first of the Marstons.
126	XXIX. The first of the Marstons.
128	XXX. The first of the Marstons.
130	XXXI. The first of the Marstons.
132	XXXII. The first of the Marstons.
134	XXXIII. The first of the Marstons.
136	XXXIV. The first of the Marstons.
138	XXXV. The first of the Marstons.
140	XXXVI. The first of the Marstons.
142	XXXVII. The first of the Marstons.
144	XXXVIII. The first of the Marstons.
146	XXXIX. The first of the Marstons.
148	XL. The first of the Marstons.
150	XLI. The first of the Marstons.
152	XLII. The first of the Marstons.
154	XLIII. The first of the Marstons.
156	XLIV. The first of the Marstons.
158	XLV. The first of the Marstons.
160	XLVI. The first of the Marstons.
162	XLVII. The first of the Marstons.
164	XLVIII. The first of the Marstons.
166	XLIX. The first of the Marstons.
168	L. The first of the Marstons.
170	L. The first of the Marstons.
172	L. The first of the Marstons.
174	L. The first of the Marstons.
176	L. The first of the Marstons.
178	L. The first of the Marstons.
180	L. The first of the Marstons.
182	L. The first of the Marstons.
184	L. The first of the Marstons.
186	L. The first of the Marstons.
188	L. The first of the Marstons.
190	L. The first of the Marstons.
192	L. The first of the Marstons.
194	L. The first of the Marstons.
196	L. The first of the Marstons.
198	L. The first of the Marstons.
200	L. The first of the Marstons.

CONTENTS

OF VOLUME II.

	Page
CHAPTER I. How a Farewell Letter was received	7
— II. Olivia's Resentment	16
— III. Algernon Tharpe	33
— IV. Mrs. Quintus Smith's Dinner-party	47
— V. The Return of Old Friends.	58
— VI. Miss Pringle's Diplomacy	68
— VII. Algernon gets his Answer	80
— VIII. Two Lives in Paris	88
— IX. Travelling Companions	99
— X. In Eaton-place	107
— XI. An Evening Party	120
— XII. A Discovery	135
— XIII. Julian under Discussion	144
— XIV. A Wet Sunday	161
— XV. Before the Curtain	173
— XVI. The Cloud gathers	186
— XVII. Clara, a Model and a Shining Light	200
— XVIII. Milton-Eyre Abbey	210
— XIX. Coming to the Point	219
— XX. The Manor-House Garden	233
— XXI. In the Moonlight	242
— XXII. Dramatis Personæ	250

	Page
CHAPTER XXIII. Warwick and Julian	259
— XXIV. The Last Appeal	270
— XXV. Miss Pringle unbosoms Herself	282
— XXVI. The Struggle for Mastery	295
— XXVII. The Riven Chain	308
— XXVIII. Postscript	315

THE MARSTONS.

CHAPTER I.

How a Farewell Letter was received.

MISS PRINGLE said not a word of this visit to her niece. From that day forward she avoided Mr. Thompson's name, and as Olivia never mentioned him, the artist seemed a subject forgotten by both. *Seemed* only. The niece's thoughts, as she sat there silently working, were constantly of him, and she wondered with sorrow and dismay when ten — twelve — fourteen days went by without her seeing or hearing from him. The aunt, you may be sure, thought about him, too, in a certain fright lest Olivia should discover what she had done; not unmixed with exultation at the success of her diplomacy. Yes, the more she thought about it the more credit she gave herself for the skilful handling of a delicate matter — if only Olivia could be kept from knowing anything about it, and could be made to forget the man, which it was evident she did not! Miss Pringle's natural fear was that Olivia would write and ask why his visits had suddenly ceased. But for many obvious reasons she never did this.

One morning the Parcels Delivery Company brought a small flat deal case for Olivia.

It held a slight oil sketch, from recollection, of Mr.

Marston's head. The character and expression, more than the actual facts of the face, were given with wonderful truth. Olivia knew at once from whose hand it came, before she read the few lines that accompanied it. Precious this gift would have been from any one, doubly so from him. She would not have exchanged that small deal case and bit of canvas within it for the Queen of Spain's jewels. This was what was written in a thick upright hand upon a sheet of paper that lay folded over the painting:

"MY DEAR MISS MARSTON, — I am going abroad for a long time, and we may probably never meet again.

"Will you, at parting, accept of this sketch, done from recollection? I know how imperfect it is, yet I believe you will care to have it. I send, instead of bringing, it to you, because leave-takings are always useless, foolish, and sometimes painful. No need to make the old wounds bleed afresh; the wise man heals or *hides* them. You are well cared for in your new home, and have every prospect of being happy — ultimately.

"I feel that I can be of no further service to you. That I have been so in some small degree during the past months I look upon among the rare good fortunes in my life, as I shall ever regard that time as its brightest season.

"Yours most faithfully,

"H. T."

The letter dropped from her hand upon the floor. She felt stunned. She could not understand it. A

dead, cold weight was at her heart, which made her, for a time, incapable of thought or action.

Then, after a while, slowly picking up the letter, she re-read those lines. As she did so, many conflicting emotions arose in her breast. Among them, strange as it may seem, a certain pleasure. For the first time, the possibility that he thought of her with something more than mere interest and regard — that he really loved her with the strength of a self-contained, undemonstrative nature — dawned upon Olivia. How else could she explain the words he had here used? She could not explain it. The more she thought over that letter, and she tried to do so calmly and dispassionately, the more it seemed to her that such a man as this — the very soul of truth and honour, of few words, sparing of "sentiment" — would never, at such a moment, use language signifying much when his heart meant little. The very style went to prove it. The writer had wished to be as terse and measured as he could: a passionate regret struggled for utterance nevertheless, and forced itself to be heard.

— Then came the question, Why did he go? What had led to this sudden resolution? Could he not have waited and trusted to time? Was he so blind as not to see it was cruel, it was ungenerous, to break off from her in this abrupt way, when he must know what his friendship and counsel, if nothing else, was to her? She tried to fan the spark of anger into a flame, and failed. She had refused him decisively and, as she then thought, irrevocably. If it were, indeed, true that he cared for her, what right had she to expect that he would go on wasting his life and energies upon her? He was not a man to do things by halves. If he be-

lieved her decision to be final; if, loving her, he believed that she would never love him, she knew that he would fight with his passion; he would probably put the width of the world between them; he would never sit down like a weaker man and feed his disease for lack of energy to use the knife and courage to gird up his loins, but turn to the work his hands should find to do in the world.

Still, there was the question unanswered: what had led to this sudden resolution? What did he mean by saying she had "every prospect of being happy ultimately"? She repeated this sentence over and over again to herself. It was clear some meaning she could not fathom lay hidden there. He had not been near her for almost three weeks. He had then parted from her promising to call again in a few days. What had occurred in the interim? What could have led to this change, so rapid and unlooked for?

A cloud of suspicion, "like a man's hand," darkened the horizon of her thoughts. It grew, and grew, till she felt persuaded that her aunt, directly or indirectly, was the cause of this. Jane, the maid, brought some water into Olivia's room half an hour later. She was questioned closely by the young lady. Had any one called and asked for her during the last few days, when she and Fritz were out? Jane didn't remember — thought not.

Olivia. But *I* think so. Try, now, and carry your mind back a week or two. Have you always opened the door when Fritz was out?

The maid is dull, and "believes" so.

"Well, and are you sure you have let no one

in who asked for me? Perhaps Miss Pringle may have——”

Jane. Yes, miss.

Olivia. Yes *what?* What do you mean?

Jane. There was a gen'leman, I think I mind, one Sunday, miss.

Olivia. And he asked for me?

Jane. Well, I think so, miss. Any ways, missis saw 'im.

Olivia. What was he like?

Jane. Well, I don't know as I paid partic'lar attention, miss, but 'e'd a lot of 'air on 'is face. A tall, lusty gen'leman, I should say.

Olivia. I suppose that was two Sundays ago? In the morning? I and Fritz were at church? That will do, Jane; mind you always tell *me* if any one calls on me when Fritz is out.

She was indignant with her aunt; and she let the sun go down upon her wrath. She had twenty minds about speaking to her or not on the subject. Two considerations prevailed, ultimately, to keep her silent. She was afraid of losing her self-control, and of saying that which she might afterwards regret, if she opened her lips to question and accuse; and she was very certain that if she did question, she would not get the truth from her aunt. One thing puzzled her, and threw just a lingering shade of doubt over her suspicions. Holding the opinion Mr. Thompson did of Miss Pringle, how and what could she have said that could have had any weight with him? To a small impertinence or slight he would be impervious, for Olivia's sake: of that she felt sure. He also knew what her feelings towards her aunt were. It seemed difficult to believe

that he would attach importance to anything Miss Pringle would do or say. Yet it was clear he had seen her; and it seemed probable that, after this interview, he had taken his resolution not to come near Olivia again.

The niece's heart was hardened more than ever against the old lady; and the desire to free herself from a companionship so uncongenial to her in all ways strengthened every day. This brought about results to which we shall presently come. In the meantime let us see how Olivia replied to Mr. Thompson's letter. She thought about it a long time. It was not till the following day that she finally posted, with her own hand (lest mischance or treachery should befall it), a composition which, to her, seemed cold and inadequate to express what she felt. But, between this dread and a womanly repugnance to say too much, she had wavered so long as to lose, it appeared to her, all power to express herself. She read and re-read her own words, with every varying intonation, until she grew confused as to the weight and meaning that should attach to them, and said to herself it all depended on the spirit and disposition of him who read. She herself, we know, was an experienced and excellent reader. When she threw, now, a veil of grateful and regretful tenderness over her voice, she was almost afraid she had written too much. But then again, if she changed to the leading-article tone and manner, it was wonderful how dry the letter seemed. With much misgiving, however, she sent it at last:

"MY DEAR MR. THOMPSON, — I will not attempt to thank you for the beautiful sketch of my father you

have sent me. I may say, however, and most truly, that it is more precious to me than anything I possess. The likeness is wonderful; and as I sit with it now before me, I seem to see his dear head leaning back in the arm-chair by the fire, as I used to see it from my childhood for years — until the end.

“I wish a gift which gives me such unalloyed pleasure had not been accompanied by a letter which gave me so much pain. I do not understand some part of it; but I understand this much, that you are leaving England, without seeing me, and that you suggest that we may never meet again. Whatever may have led you to make this decision, dear Mr. Thompson, I cannot submit to part thus from almost the only friend I have. Of course I have no right to expect that you would give up going abroad — but I think it cruel that you will not wish me good-bye. Why will you not come and see me? And will you tell me what you mean by my prospect of happiness ultimately? You cannot think I shall ever be very happy *here* (however much I may struggle for contentment), and beyond this home I have no prospects. My brother does not know when he may be able to return to England. In this house, therefore, you will in all probability still find me on your return from abroad. May I not look forward to that time? I cannot help fearing that you have been misled by some one about me. Whatever you may have heard from others, or whatever you may imagine yourself, there is no one to whom I can apply for counsel, or for help, when you leave England.

“If you believe this, you will come and see me

once more before that. But, whether or not, I must always remain, most gratefully and sincerely yours,

“OLIVIA MARSTON.”

And yet he never came.

For the best of reasons; he never got the letter. Poor Olivia! all her anxiety about the wording, all her precaution as to the posting, were thrown away. Mr. Thompson had started that morning for Normandy and Britany on an artistic tour. He meant afterwards to wander down into Spain with a friend, who was to meet him at Rouen; and there it was he desired his letters to be forwarded. Now, the individual who was instructed to do this, wrote an infamous hand, and on Olivia's cover he scrawled something, which the Post-office not unnaturally mistook for *Rome*. Months afterwards, when he *did* go to the latter city, his letters were addressed to the care of his banker, Tortonia; and for aught I know; this document, yellow with years, may still adorn the glass case of the “*Posta Restante*,” waiting to be claimed by the stranger who never comes for it.

But at Rouen, a week after he left London, Mr. Thompson asked for letters, and turned away gloomy and empty-handed.

“She has written, of course she has, and it has gone astray. Why didn't I wait for it? I was so impatient to get away, to leave, if possible, the memory of it all behind me; and now — well, my getting her letter could do me no good. I know all that she will have said in it!

“Absence and work — absence and work! There is nothing else for it. I'm not a weak love-sick boy,

to let the thought of this conquer me. Now that I know there is another she cares for, and who cares for her, — yes, I am better away. *His* right it now is to watch over her as I would have done. . . .

. . . . "A whole week, and not a single sketch! Whenever I sit down, her face rises up between me and the paper. To think that I, of all men, should have come to this!"

And thus muttering, thus vainly striving to deceive himself, the strong man, in his weakness, wandered down to the Seine, and leaned over the bridge, looking down into the rapid water beneath him. The sun set, and the moon rose, and found him still in his soul-bitterness, mourning over the second great wreck in his life. There, for the present, we leave him.

Olivia, on the other hand, waited day after day; at first watching eagerly each postman's knock, each ring at the bell. Then, at last, the hope that he would come, or write again, grew faint. She felt sure her letter had miscarried. He certainly would have answered her, otherwise. She was very miserable, poor girl. She prayed for resignation; she wrestled in prayer for strength to carry her daily cross; but, somehow, the answer seemed only to come in increased hardness and resentment against her aunt.

CHAPTER II.

Olivia's Resentment.

I HAVE, as yet, said nothing of Rupert's letter on the receipt of the news of his father's death; for I preferred seeing Thompson abroad first, and disposing of him for the time, so far as he affects this narration, before I turned to other matters.

Olivia had received her brother's letter already some days when she wrote to Thompson. It was as she said. Nothing could be more affectionate, more generous and considerate for his sister than Rupert showed himself in this letter: he offered to sacrifice his own worldly prospects, and to return at once to England, if she desired it—if she was unhappy and ill at ease under her aunt's roof. But, at the same time, he pointed out plainly all that this entailed. The interests of his employers would suffer greatly; and he himself would forfeit the claim he now had to occupy a more prominent and lucrative position in the business, on his return, a few months hence. Of course the idea of such a sacrifice was not to be entertained for a moment by Olivia. Whatever she might suffer in the interval, must be borne by her, alone, with a good courage, and wearing, at least, a cheerful mask in all her letters to him. Not otherwise did she understand affection: and nobly Rupert repaid it. He had executed a deed by which he made over to Olivia whatever little property his father had left: and to this was added an order on his banker for half his year's salary. She wrote back, assuring him that she had

enough for all present wants: that she was well cared for, and that no one could be more anxious than her aunt to reconcile her to her new home and life.

This was strictly true. Though we may be disposed to object to the means taken by Miss Pringle to attain this end, and to further her niece's temporal interests, it is but fair to own that she spent more thought, trouble, and anxiety upon Olivia than many a selfish old maid would have done in a like case. And, if it be urged that remote personal advantages to herself were to accrue from her niece's "settling well," I reply that we must not push analysis in these cases too far. After her kind, she had a genuine interest in Olivia, and a genuine interest in any human creature is better than none at all. So far as it was given to her to be fond of any one, she was fond of her niece. We have seen, earlier in this history, that she was not capable of making a great sacrifice for her; but she liked very much having her in the house, and devising new dresses for her, and making her little presents, and hearing the admiration she excited, which gave Miss Pringle an opportunity of referring to her own past triumphs. And she liked, above all things, plotting and manœuvring a marriage for her.

But all this was now further than ever away from Olivia's manner of taking life, or of understanding affection. She had grown more intolerant, instead of less so — a thing which rarely happens as we advance in years. But her heart was sore just now; partly, no doubt, from her recent sorrow, but more from her resentment about Thompson, whose absence she felt certain was owing to her aunt. There was a time — and only a few months ago — that she could laugh

over Miss Pringle's absurdities. Now, the spinster's society was a perpetual irritation to her: the buzzing of an insect, that will not be wiped away, was the only image it suggested. She writhed under the dissertations about furbelows and trimmings; she hated her aunt's little presents of bugles and jet; she never wore them; she no longer smiled at the vain old woman's anecdotes of her youth; she made no show of returning her relative's somewhat over-demonstrative affection. If it was possible to escape kissing her, she did: when reminded that she had not done so, she just touched the little wrinkled forehead, under its chestnut wig, with her lips: no more. Lastly, she avoided, in the most marked manner, all her aunt's visitors. As they came in by one door she walked out at the other: and if Miss Pringle ventured to repeat any remark complimentary to Olivia, it was received with disdain. She was very wrong, no doubt: I am afraid her conduct, which I generally admire, was not influenced, in this instance, by the highest spirit of Christian gentleness, forgiveness, charity. But, at least, there were allowances to be made for her: and there was no hypocrisy: these virtues were not assumed. There was the key-stone of her character. She did not think well of her aunt. She believed — though without any positive proof — that she had recently done her a great wrong — a wrong which cankered at Olivia's heart, and grieved her all the more bitterly that she said nothing of it. She could not feign smiles, and coin oily phrases, she said to herself, when her feelings were as gall and wormwood; and so, like many another, she believed she was doing strictly her duty, in making no effort to be agreeable, when, it is pos-

sible, some effort might have been more laudable. For instance, to take the fruitful subject of servants, Miss Pringle was constantly launching forth, and appealing to her niece in this strain:

"What do you think I have just found Sarah doing? I watched her for full five minutes, standing at the area gate, talking to the baker. What business has she talking to the baker, I wonder, instead of minding her work? *That's* why the leg of mutton was boiled to rags yesterday."

Olivia did not point out the very illogical sequence of her aunt's deduction: she held her peace.

"*Now* I understand why she takes in four rolls, instead of three. Three, I am sure, would do, eh? Don't you think four *is* a great deal too much, Olivia?"

"I really don't know."

"Ah! You always *were* a very careless house-keeper. But at all events your morality, and so forth, *must* tell you it's a most abominable thing for her to be gossiping in that way at the area railings — quite *improper* — leads to so much."

"Human nature is much the same in all classes, I suppose. You like your gossip, and so does Sarah."

"Good gracious! What a — a comparison! I never permit followers, *never*. And so I shall tell her, once for all."

"That must lead to a great deal of duplicity;" said Olivia, without lifting her eyes from her work. "I would rather have the open gossip than the stealthy underhand visits, if I were you."

"Your ideas are quite *foreign* — much too lax for

England," returned Miss Pringle, testily, as she left the room.

Another time it was:

"My dear, *which* do you think it ought to be, Sarah or Jane to clean the front door-step? Both say it is the other's place."

Olivia professed her inability to solve this knotty point. Whereupon her aunt continued:

"So ridiculous! Such an absurd trifle! Only a little hearth-stone and whiting. Why, any one could do it in five minutes."

"The question is not one of time, is it? The women wish it to be settled whose duty it is."

"Well, I think I shall tell Fritz to do it. As a foreigner, he won't mind, and that will settle the point. These servants are the plague of my life!"

"Pray don't ask Fritz. He already does a great deal no English servant would do. For my dear father he did all sorts of things; but this I think he would refuse to do, point-blank, for you—and *I* certainly shall not ask him."

"Well, I think you might do something to assist me in all my domestic difficulties. There's that creature, Susan, been and given me warning again, for the fourth time. I suppose I shall have to bribe her to stay; not but that I'd willingly part with her, for she's an impudent hussy, only she's quick at her needle. But, somehow, I think she has got worse since you came, for she is always throwing you at my teeth, 'Miss *Olivia* does this,' and 'Miss *Olivia* says t' other.' I suspect you spoil the creature; she's certainly more *uppish* than she was."

Olivia felt so inclined to say something intolerably

rude to her aunt — to read her a homily on the treatment of servants, and the impossibility of getting the best sort of service from those you do not treat with kindness and consideration — that to save herself from such an unbecoming outbreak she had to leave the room.

And this sort of thing was of daily occurrence. Olivia's nerves had been a good deal shaken; she felt herself to be irritable, and had much ado often to bite her tongue, and refrain from answering her aunt as she felt inclined.

It was so different from anything to which she had ever been accustomed. It was all so *little*. Petty interests and petty gossipings; petty pleasures and petty annoyances; petty suspicions and petty scoldings. When at the Cedars, Miss Pringle had never had the opportunity of showing her full capacity in this line.

She went out to cards and tea at least once a week: Olivia remained at home. At the end of four months, to a day, after her niece had arrived in her house, Miss Pringle organised a conspiracy.

Mr. and Mrs. Quintus Smith were concerned therein.

So was Mr. Harrington — of whom more anon.

So was *not* Mr. Algernon Tharpe, who, nevertheless, was of the party.

At eight o'clock that evening Mr. Harrington walked into Miss Pringle's drawing-room.

Olivia, with a strange want of feminine observation, had not marked that her aunt had changed her cap, and that four extra cups were set upon the tea-tray. She looked up from her book, much surprised at the announcement of a visitor at this hour. Her re-

treat from the door was cut off by the table. Before she could effect it in any way, Mr. Harrington had been introduced, and was sitting down, chatting as comfortably and pleasantly as though such a thing as a misanthropic young lady never had existed.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure, Mr. Harrington," said that artful old dodger, Miss Pringle, "to drop in here, and take a hand at whist; I'm sure I hardly expected you. I hope Mr. and Mrs. Quintus Smith may drop in, too — so friendly! as the French say, *sans façon*, and Olivia won't mind us, but go on with her book all the same; won't you, my love?"

It was unnecessary for Olivia to reply. Mr. Harrington did all the talking for her, and she took out a piece of crochet resignedly. He was a stout, rubicund, cheery old bachelor of sixty-five; excessively good-natured, fond of his own jokes, at which he laughed a short, fat laugh; having an enormous acquaintance with various kinds of people, which he kept up assiduously, and being a great favourite among the young, in whose pleasures and troubles he always sympathised. To whom did a youthful scapegrace fly so readily as to "old Harrington," if he wanted, not advice, but money? He was rich: he had few personal expenses, and his purse was open to a set of omnivorous nephews, nieces, distant cousins, and the offshoots of his old friends. Among these were the Quintus Smiths: it was at their house Miss Pringle had made the old gentleman's acquaintance.

"Poor thing!" he had said, when Miss Pringle deplored to him the impossibility to drag or coax Olivia from her obstinate retirement, and had coloured the narration after her own peculiar manner. "And so

you want to carry this little fortress by a coup-de-main, ma'am? He! he! Well, it's not badly thought of. If you let it grow into a habit with the poor child — and she is so religious, too — we shall have her going into a convent, or something; and then Newdegate will be saying you've locked her up, and Sir George Bowyer will be defending the sanctity of the cloister. Oh! oh! No; we must stop that, eh? So I'm to come in at eight o'clock this evening, am I? Very good. And the Smiths are to bring their young inamorato with them? — I see; and he is to make the running, while we old fogies sit over our cards. Is that it? Ho! ho!"

And now there he was, sitting on the sofa by Olivia, talking as fast as any tongue ever yet talked, and never stopping but to chuckle twice, take a long breath, and run on again, of people, things, places — old stories, new facts, told at a railroad pace, in a rich unctuous voice, without a spark of pretension or ill-nature.

It was near nine o'clock before the more mundane Mrs. Quintus Smith entered the room, followed by her husband and nephew.

By this time Olivia had got quite accustomed to her old gentleman, and rather liked listening to him than otherwise; it gave her no trouble, and he seemed so genuine and kindly that she felt drawn towards him. But it was a different matter with these other people; and, moreover, to use a homely but forcible expression, she very distinctly "smelt a rat." So she rose, and tried to get to the door.

Miss P. My dear Mrs. Quintus Smith! how very kind of you! now this really *is*, — taking us en famille

in this way! and you've brought your nephew! delighted to see you, Mr. Tharpe. My dear Olivia, you mustn't run away; we are going to sit down to whist, and you must, like a dear child, entertain Mr. Tharpe (Olivia looked as if she could have eaten him) while we four — eh? Mrs. Quintus Smith, let me introduce my niece, Miss Marston. Mr. Quintus Smith, Mr. Tharpe.

The gentlemen bowed. Olivia gave her head the slightest possible inclination; then she stood for a moment, irresolute whether to stay or fly. It was too bad of her aunt, a great deal too bad, to force her to do what she hated, or else make her appear affected and ill-bred. But, after a moment's hesitation, she went and sat down as far from these new visitors as the limits of the small drawing-room would permit.

But she did not know yet that sweetly persistent, inexorable aunt of hers.

"Olivia, my love, will you come and make tea for me, while I arrange the card-table?" (Olivia savagely rose, scowling at the urn.) "My dear Mrs. Quintus Smith, *do* take this chair; black or green tea, eh? and which does Mr. Quintus take? As to you, Mr. Tharpe, I shall leave you to my niece. Mr. Harrington, I and Mr. Quintus mean to have our revenge, to-night, on Mrs. Quintus and you, so look out! My dear Mrs. Quintus, what lace that is! you make me quite jealous! only you should wear it over canary-colour, you should *indeed*. I had a canary-coloured gown once myself, which was *said* to be vastly becoming, and it shows off lace so!"

"It was my grandmamma's family lace," said Mrs. Quintus Smith, with half-closed eyes, as though the essence of gentility which she inhaled were almost too

overpowering, and she leant back in her chair. "Algernon, would you pick up my fan?"

He was a distressingly modest, awkward young man; tall, high-shouldered, and shambling in his gait; innocent of even a suspicion of down upon his face; neither well nor ill looking; neither clever nor the reverse; but a good, honest nature, with plenty of enthusiasm, no perseverance, and an utter incapacity of expressing himself, except in slang.

He made a dash under the table, and fumbled about for some time; and then, in rising to the surface of things, like a diver with his pearl, his foot caught in the leg of the table, which he nearly capsized. The cups and saucers danced and chattered, the teapot was spun round to the edge of the tray. Miss Pringle started up, and Mrs. Quintus gave a little scream, and the two men laughed heartily. Algernon Tharpe blushed all over his ears, and to the back of his neck, and Olivia felt a little compassion for him. To relieve his distress, she asked if he would have a cup of tea? "There is no harm done, nothing spilt," she added.

"Oh, thank you! very kind. Yes, if you please, a cup. Awfully stupid of me; I didn't know there was a leg. One lump of sugar only, thank you. What stunning tea you make!"

It was such a comfort to be able to praise anything she did! such a privilege to be able at last to speak to her, after seven long weeks of silent admiration, at church, in the gardens, or on the Crescent pavement! He had given up a dinner and two evening parties to come here. Could he have known with what eyes his coming was regarded, Algernon Tharpe's comfort for that evening had assuredly departed. As

it was, her silence, her proud, self-possessed stillness of manner, were only additional charms in his eyes. They told him only of a recent heavy sorrow, suffered by a nature that did not readily forget; and its reluctance to expand again to the smiles of strangers was no drawback, but rather fascinated him the more.

"A very high-bred looking girl," murmured Mrs. Quintus, behind her fan, to Miss Pringle. "Her father was a man of family, I think you said?"

Miss P. Good; but not so good as the Pringles. They are quite *remarkable* for — for goodness. An ancestor of ours was henchman to Robert the Bruce.

Mrs. Q. Oh, indeed! One of ours was beheaded in Edward the Fourth's reign.

And Mrs. Quintus altogether closed her eyes this time; the essence of antiquity was quite too strong for her. She opened them pensively to remark:

"Algernon is very like his great-grandfather, don't you think so?"

Miss P. Great-grandfather, eh?

Mrs. Q. Yes — about the nose, especially.

Miss P. I —— surely I never can have had the pleasure of seeing his *great-grandfather* — eh?

Mrs. Q. (*opening her eyes wide*). Why, you *must* remember his picture, in his judge's robes, my dear Miss Pringle; the engraving hangs in my drawing-room. All the Tharpes have, more or less, his nose, and Algernon has it more than most.

It was to be hoped so, seeing that the one in question was unusually large. Miss Pringle, like a wise old serpent as she was, dilated on the aristocracy of large noses, and referred, incidentally, to the scion of a certain noble house, who had sat next to her at

dinner during a whole season at Harrogate, and whose attentions to her had been the subject of much comment: *his* nose, she added, was so large as to interfere with his wine-glass.

Here Mr. Harrington, who had been talking incessantly to Quintus Smith (a perfect nonentity, by-the-way — “une machine à jouer du whist,” as I heard a Frenchwoman once style such another man), broke off to exclaim:

“We are talking” (it was good of him to say “*we*,” when Quintus had not spoken for ten minutes) — “we are talking of the Pomfrets, Miss Pringle — didn’t you once live somewhere near them? I’m sure I remember your telling me so. Well, he has just taken a fine place in Berkshire, close to Mr. Tharpe — Milton-Eyre Abbey. He only came from Paris a fortnight ago; heard the place was to be let; went down and saw it; and took it on a running lease of seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years. Gives a fabulous rent. I say he ought to change the name to *Millionnaire* Abbey. Ho! ho! rolling in money — absolutely *rolling*. Good fellow, Pomfret, very good; and good woman, his wife; and the daughters are good girls; and the poor fellow who died was —”

“*No*,” interrupted Miss Pringle, emphatically: “*no*, Mr. Harrington, he wasn’t, *indeed* — an underbred little wretch; the only one of the family I couldn’t abide. Ask Olivia what he was. I used to *feel* for dear Mrs. Pomfret and the girls, and I do hope the present young man is very different. Are they in London? You would like to see them, my dear Olivia, I’m sure — such *great* friends of yours.”

Before she could reply, Mr. Harrington said they were not in London — would not be for some weeks. He gave Olivia their address, at Dover, and she said she would write to them. Indeed, she would have done so before, had she known where to direct a letter. But she had no clue to their address. She had not heard from Mrs. Pomfret since the letter she had received from Nice the preceding spring.

The quartette now adjourned to the whist-table, and Olivia returned to the sofa and took up her crochet. Algernon Tharpe stood at the table, handling a paper-cutter — which he dropped. Then he took up a book of photographs, and contrived to bend or hamper the clasp, much to his own confusion; and then he leant against the table, until its rosewood support creaked loudly a remonstrance. Olivia, glancing up at those long disastrous legs, and thence to the crimson-blushing, honest face a-top, could hardly forbear a smile; and, relenting once more, she spoke:

Olivia. That clasp is a very tiresome one — it is always getting twisted. Never mind it.

Tharpe. I hope it isn't your book. I'm so sorry. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Is there any photograph of you in it? This isn't you on horseback.

Olivia. No; I have never been photographed. That is Miss Pomfret.

Tharpe. What, the daughter of the old fellow who has just taken Milton-Eyre Abbey? It's close to us. She must be a pretty gal, but her horse is awfully groggy on his fore legs.

Olivia. What is "groggy"?

Tharpe. Oh, I beg your pardon, it's slang — I

know one oughtn't to talk slang. It means shaky — not sound. Don't you ride, Miss Marston?

Olivia. I used. I have not ridden for a long time — have never ridden, indeed, in England.

Tharpe. You should go down into Berkshire — there is such jolly riding over our Berkshire hills.

Olivia. Do you live there entirely?

Tharpe. Well, my governor is at the bar, you know, and so we *live* in London, but we run down there constantly. We've nothing of a place there, but —

Olivia. Don't you think you had better take a chair? I am afraid that table won't support you.

Tharpe. Oh, I'm sure I beg your pardon. No, I'll stand, thank you.

But in two minutes the table began creaking again.

Olivia. What sort of place is Milton-Eyre Abbey?

Tharpe. Why, it's a big park, with awfully fine timber, and such shooting! — by Jove! what tip-top shooting there is! The house is no end of an old place, with a thundering big hall; but it's not been lived in — that is, not properly lived in — for some years, and it looks awfully gloomy and ghost-like, whenever I go up there to cricket in the park — or anything.

Olivia. What do you mean by not *properly* lived in?

Tharpe. Why, Sir Warwick just lives in a couple of rooms when he *is* there, which is very seldom since Lady Milton's death; and even before that it wasn't much better — rather worse, indeed. He's such a splendid chap; I'd give something that he'd come back and live there, instead of going and letting the place. It's a horrid shame; and been in the family so long, too!

Olivia (after a considerable pause, during which her thoughts had wandered, and feeling the necessity to make conversation). I suppose you are a great sportsman?

Tharpe (reddening). Oh! I'm great at nothing.

The table here gave a loud squeak. "Good-hearted and modest," said *Olivia* to herself; "but afraid to get himself a chair, for which he will have to walk to the other end of the room. If I don't help him, he will never sit down; and he will break the table."

She moved her dress a little, and said:

"There is room on this sofa, Mr. Tharpe."

He rushed at it. That was his peculiarity: he did everything with such a sudden vehemence that he generally came to grief. This time, however, he anchored safely on the sofa with his photograph-book. He turned the leaves, till he came to one where he made a dead point.

"'Rupert Marston' — is that your brother? Where is he?"

Olivia (with a sigh). A long way off — in California.

Tharpe. What a lucky fellow he is, to have a sister! I wish I had one.

Olivia. Sometimes, I am afraid she is more of a trouble than anything else. Have you brothers?

Tharpe. No; I'm all alone at home, my governor and I. He's A No. 1, my governor is. You don't know him, do you? (Sighing.) He's a deal too clever for me. You ought to know him, Miss Marston.

Olivia (for want of something to reply). I suppose he is hard at work all day. Are you in any profession?

Tharpe. Oh, no. The governor says I'm not fit for anything. Since I left Oxford, last term, I've done nothing but loaf about. I'm horridly idle, you know. I like things, but somehow or other I can't do them; I wish I could. I've a tremendous veneration, do you know, for talent, and genius, and all that.

Olivia. Don't you read?

Tharpe. I read to the governor at night generally, but he is always *fast* before I've done the leading article; and, except novels, I'm afraid I don't read much else. It's too slow, doing things alone. It must be awfully jolly having a sister, I think. I hate knocking about at cider-cellars, and places, at night; and if I don't dine out, the evenings are awful, with the governor asleep and not a soul to speak to.

Olivia. Are you fond of music?

Tharpe. Ain't I just!

Olivia. Why don't you learn to play something?

Tharpe. Oh, I couldn't. My fingers are like bits of wood. But I can listen. Oh, I can listen for hours together. (Suddenly and vehemently.) Do you play, Miss Marston?

Olivia. Yes; but I have not been playing lately.

Tharpe. Oh! how I *do* wish you'd play me something. I'm no judge, you know, so you needn't mind — and I'd give *anything* —

"Do, my love," chirped Miss Pringle, who had kept an eye and an ear open on her niece from the distant whist-table; and with something that strongly resembled a wink at Mrs. Quintus Smith, she added, "You needn't be afraid of disturbing us. You won't the least. Do, there's a dear girl — something lively. Mrs. Quintus Smith, it's your turn to deal."

Strange as it may seem, Olivia actually did get up and go to the piano — not at her aunt's request, but because she felt a certain compassion and liking for the honest, innocent youth at her side; and she, who had not opened the piano since she entered that house, sat down with stiff, unwilling fingers to try and give him half an hour's pleasure.

How curious it is that, sometimes, the society of a person utterly indifferent to us — perhaps intellectually our inferior in all ways — has the power to affect us so strongly, as to make us feel more cheerful, more contented with life; or to send us home with a bad taste in our mouths that we cannot get rid of all night.

I suppose we all have known what this is.

Clearly, there was something about the lad — he seemed scarcely more — that affected Olivia Marston for good. She began the evening feeling angry with her aunt, and offended with her guests. What had Mr. Tharpe done that she should be playing to him little bits of Mendelssohn and Heller before that evening was over? What was there about him that should soften her voice, and relax the distant coldness of her manner? Why, when she got up-stairs, and after she had read her Bible, and sat thinking with her head between her hands, did it seem to her that her conduct towards her aunt was wanting in forbearance, and in charity? She thought of that simple awkward young Tharpe sitting alone with his father (who was evidently no companion to his son) night after night, and she knew he had unconsciously read her a lesson.

Meantime, so little are our outward looks and words (far less our thoughts) understood, that Miss Pringle

could not refrain from whispering to Mrs. Quintus on the stairs, as she wrapped her shawl round that lady at parting:

"*Wonderful* success, my dear! Far greater than I expected: she actually made him sit down on the sofa *beside her*, and then played to him! I couldn't believe my ears — not touched the piano since she came! Nothing could be more favourable — more satisfactory, I'm sure! I look on our success as *certain* now."

Poor deluded people!

CHAPTER III.

Algernon Tharpe.

OLIVIA rose next morning full of good resolutions. She said to herself she had been selfish in virtually depriving her old aunt of her chief amusement — society, and in being hard and unconciliatory towards her. Whatever cause of complaint she might have against Miss Pringle; whether her suspicions were just or unjust concerning her; however much she might hate and despise all her little ways; so long as Olivia thought fit to live under the same roof with her aunt, she was bound to consider her in some degree. She felt that she had not done so; and, with a sigh, she resolved to make an effort henceforward, and receive, with the best grace she could, whatever friends her aunt chose to invite to the house.

Miss Pringle was delighted to observe the change in her niece's manner that day. Algernon Tharpe got the credit of it, as, indeed, he deserved, but not in the character attributed to him by Miss Pringle. The idea

of a girl's falling in love, at first sight, with that excellent but most awkward youth would never have occurred to any one but an old lady on match-making intent. Yet what she so fervently hoped she got at last, as we shall see, actually to believe.

Tharpe paid a long visit this afternoon. He was less shy, but quite as awkward. He knocked down a work-table, and sent the reels of cotton spinning all over the floor. Then he went down on his hands and knees, with his face like a peony, and prosecuted a search, which was really painful to Olivia, under sofas and cabinets, coming up in an apoplectic condition, and with fragments of dust and cobweb adhering to him — for which Miss Pringle's housemaid suffered justly, when he was gone. Finally, he sat so long, that it became evident to both aunt and niece, that he did not know how to get away. Between him and the drawing-room door was a great gulf fixed, across which he would have given any one a five-pound note to help him. He could do it, he knew, if he made a bolt for it; but to get up leisurely, shake hands, make his bow, and *walk* to the door, no! Besides, there was an American rocking-chair just in the way, against which he felt he should knock his shins, entangle his feet, and come to perdition. So he sat there, conscious that it must be fast approaching Miss Pringle's dinner-hour, six o'clock, in a pitiable condition of mind. Fritz brought in the lamp, and retired, looking severely at the visitor. Then, seeing that Miss Pringle had dropped asleep (or was pretending) in her *bergère* by the fire, Olivia rose gently, and folding up her work, said:

"I am afraid I must go and dress; will you excuse me, Mr. Tharpe? My aunt, I see, is asleep."

He had started up like a shot, when she began speaking, and now he made a dash at her hand, wrung it, and stammered:

"I'm ashamed, Miss Marston, to have stayed so long, I am, indeed. I didn't know how late it was — dreadfully stupid — you don't mind, do you? You'll let me come again? I've enjoyed my visit awfully. Thank you. Good-bye. Good evening, Miss Pringle. Good evening."

"Take care of the stairs! They are rather dark," called out Olivia, as she rang the bell.

But he was out of the room, and down the stairs, floundering four steps at a time, and had burst open the hall-door, and banged it after him, before the solemn Fritz was half way from his pantry.

That evening Olivia employed in writing to Mrs. Pomfret. There was much to be told, and it was going over sad ground, but Olivia felt it was a duty she owed to these people, who had been so uniformly kind to her. Besides, she had her own little Spanish castle, as well as Aunt Clo — and built on quite as insecure foundations. Rupert had more than once in his letters asked if Olivia had heard of the Pomfrets, and had specially mentioned the blue-eyed little Mary, expressing his curiosity to know if she was as pretty as she promised to be. How nice it would be if he came back and married her! Mr. Harrington had said she *was* very pretty, and perhaps Rupert would be rich some day, and then there would not be such a disproportion between their fortunes. At all events Olivia must not lose sight of the Pomfrets again, now that she had a clue to them, for Rupert's sake, if not for her own.

The next day came a hamper, with Mr. Tharpe's compliments to Miss Pringle. In it were all manner of country delicacies, rare, and additionally prized in that early winter-time; together with some hothouse flowers.

The day after he called again.

The day after that he was invited to tea.

Then came Sunday; when he accidentally met them on their way to church, and equally by accident found them coming out, and escorted them home.

On Tuesday, a beautiful bouquet from Covent Garden sent anonymously to Miss Marston.

On Thursday, an invitation from the Quintus Smiths to dine there on Saturday, to meet Mr. Tharpe senior and his son.

And, thereupon, the aunt and niece had the following discussion:

Miss P. Of course you'll go, my dear? A nice little friendly meeting, not a stiff formal dinner; nothing of the sort; and I want you to meet the father, eh?

Olivia. I had rather not, thank you, aunt; but I hope you will go?

Miss P. Oh, my dear! on no account. I may say the dinner is got up for you, and I couldn't think of going *without* you; couldn't indeed. Mr. Tharpe, the father, is always vastly civil when we meet, quite *remarkably* so; but on this occasion it is *you* he wants especially to see.

Olivia. *Me*, aunt?

Miss P. Yes, my love, and very natural too. Now, I do hope you won't be foolish enough, just as I thought you were getting over all this nonsense, to refuse, and shut yourself up, and —

Olivia. I am not going to shut myself up, aunt. Any one you ask here I shall receive, and I will do my best to — to seem — in short, to be civil to them; but I can't think it is necessary for me to go out, when I feel so disinclined for society. (Here Miss Pringle smiled sarcastically, and gave her head a little toss.) I should be very sorry, however, if I were any hindrance to you; but that cannot be. You know, aunt, you have not minded leaving me, these three months past, when you had invitations. Why should you not do so now, then?

Miss P. Because the time is come when you *ought* to go out, ought to mix. There is nothing like mixing for young people. I can tell you I sha'n't go out any *more* without you, Olivia, so you will be shutting me up too, which is vastly selfish of you. And such superior people as the Quintus Smiths are too! Such a refined table, so different from anything you have seen for such a long time, and altogether the marked way in which they have taken you *up*, which one could hardly expect; and altogether, I must say, I shall think it exceedingly wrong and very *ungrateful* of you, if you *rudely refuse* their kind invitation.

Olivia. I do not see that it is rude to refuse an invitation; but if my doing so is to prevent your going, I must accept, though I had far rather remain at home. I cannot think that I am wanted, and it is perfectly ridiculous to suppose that Mr. Tharpe, the father, wishes to see *me*. What can put such an idea into your head, aunt?

But aunt was wise. These were too early days to do more than drop a hint. Olivia's pride would fire up at the idea of being submitted to Mr. Tharpe's in-

spection, however much she might fancy his son. And so she turned it off by saying, that as Mrs. Quintus Smith had admired Olivia so much, it was natural that her brother, Mr. Tharpe, should be anxious to make her acquaintance.

With as good a grace as she could, Olivia yielded. It was sorely against her inclination; but she felt that this was the first test, in reality, to which her resolution had been put. Two or three hours — what was it? However uninteresting Mr. Quintus Smith, however disagreeable, in a passive way, his wife might be, their society was a very small evil; and so was the effort to be pleasant, the struggle against an utter disinclination to talk, compared with her aunt's constant cackle and tiresome irritating ways, to which Olivia was daily subject.

And now, why did Mrs. Quintus Smith encourage her nephew's admiration for a poor girl with neither money nor great connexions? It seemed odd, certainly (knowing Mrs. Quintus's weak point), and Miss Pringle was justified in remarking, that it never could have been expected that Olivia should be so "taken up."

The explanation was to be divided, like a sermon, into three heads. Firstly, Mr. Tharpe, senior (whom we have already met), a man who managed to quarrel with most of his neighbours, had, in spite of his good birth, singularly democratic and levelling ideas, which he forced down his sister's throat whenever he was in that lady's company. He was not a pleasant man to live with, as his sister knew. He could occasionally do generous things; he much oftener said harsh and bitter ones. Mrs. Quintus Smith felt a real pity for her nephew, of whom, in her frigid way, she was fond.

Theoretically, Mr. Tharpe would not object to his son's marrying a barmaid. Mrs. Quintus lived in constant dread of Algernon's falling a prey to some such charmer; he was so innocent and enthusiastic, and therefore easily led astray. His father had been harder and shrewder in his generation; which brings us to head the second.

Algernon Tharpe was illegitimate. His mother had died shortly after his birth; and Mr. Tharpe had always recognised him as his heir. Still the first-named fact was well known among his set; and it was also known that his father was strange, capricious, and little to be depended on. He might choose to make no settlements on his daughter-in-law; he might marry; he might leave the bulk of his fortune to a hospital. Few fathers or guardians of daughters would trust to such a reed as this, and Mr. Tharpe was just the man to take offence at any attempt to dictate or stipulate; and just the man too to break off a marriage, or disinherit his son at the eleventh hour.

Thirdly, then, and as a *sequitur* from the above, Olivia had neither father, uncle, nor guardian, to ask inconvenient questions. There was a brother, indeed, somewhere — but far away. She was a perfect lady in manner, appearance, and birth. Miss Pringle dropped continually on this last point, day after day, and to such an effect, that she wore conviction as to Robert the Bruce's henchman into the stone of Mrs. Quintus's breast. Here then was a beauty of noble extraction, graceful and distinguished in manner, "who would be an ornament to any society," as Mrs. Quintus expressed it, with no one but an old aunt, to whom the fact that Mr. Tharpe was a rich man living in Portman-square was all-sufficient, and who would make no uncomfort-

able inquiries about certificates of birth, settlements, entails, &c. Was there not sufficient reason for a prudent woman to advocate Olivia's cause?

Before the Saturday came, Algernon Tharpe called again at Miss Pringle's. This time, he sat exactly an hour and twenty minutes, and he only broke a vase of flowers, which was cheap, considering the duration of the visit. The same day Olivia had a long and most affectionate letter from Mrs. Pomfret. She and her daughters were to be in London in a month or six weeks' time, and their very first visit would be to Olivia. They had been in Germany and Switzerland all the summer, and latterly in Paris for a short time, "where we found Julian Westbrook." In reference to the past, she wrote, "We have each of us, my dear, had our own troubles since we have met—nearly two years ago. You have lost your dear father, and I my poor boy, in the prime of life, with his great talents as yet undeveloped, and such prospects before him! Ah! my dear, this is a sad world! How happy we all were eighteen months ago! This great place Mr. Pomfret has taken will never be to *me* what Caverton was; but I suppose for the girls and for Henry it will be nice. He is come home from the West Indies, and is thought very handsome, and made a great deal of in the very highest society; indeed, I do not mind saying to you that I think in a certain quarter it will *come to something*. He is a good kind boy to me and to his sisters. They are both well, and send you many loves. They are beginning to go out again now after our long mourning, and Mary will be presented at the first drawing-room."

It was a long letter, and ran over eight pages; very

kindly in feeling, and interspersed with touching expressions of the mother's unhealed sorrow. The three excellent and comely children who were left were evidently as nothing to her when weighed in the scale with the miserable little creature, physically and morally, who had been taken.

Thinking over this letter carried Olivia back to the past, and she began pondering over that wretched Julian Westbrook's career. If she ever met him at the Pomfrets', how could she bring herself to speak to him, knowing what she did? Was it possible that Mrs. Pomfret had the least idea of his history, and yet allowed him to associate as a brother with her girls?

How strange, how difficult to believe it seemed, that less than twenty months ago she, Olivia, had felt the strongest interest in this man — such a feeling as in many girls passes for love, and which she herself had nearly confounded with it! She had come so close — ah! so close — to the real fire since then, that she knew now it was but stagey flame-coloured tinsel she had mistaken, out of which no warmth could ever have been gotten.

Mrs. Quintus Smith had much the best house in the Crescent. It was the corner house, with the bow window, and by standing in the balcony, and leaning forward at a perilous angle, one could see the trees in Kensington Gardens, which was supposed to be a great advantage. The house was handsomely furnished, for Quintus Smith was a well-to-do merchant. He was not a rich one, or he would have moved to a more fashionable part of the town; but Providence had blessed him with nine children, and, being a prudent man, he thought it well to stay where he was. This was a great

source of annoyance to the person whom some of his City friends were pleased to style his "good lady." Better the smallest and darkest house in Mayfair, with a black brick street in front, and black brick chimneys behind, than the gardens of Ormsby-crescent, and the fresh air of Tyburnia, in Mrs. Quintus Smith's opinion. But Quintus could be firm on occasion; and about this he had never wavered a moment. His day was spent in the City; he wanted something airier than a close street when he got away. If he could afford to live in Grosvenor or even Portman-square, he said, like his brother-in-law, well and good. But as this was not the case, it rested with his "good lady" to choose between Ormsby-crescent and a suburban villa. He actually went the length of seriously suggesting Blackheath or Highgate to her. She scorned the idea, and reconciled herself, as best she could, to her position.

Besides the Tharpes, father and son, the only guests on Saturday bidden to meet Miss Pringle and her niece were Mr. Harrington and an old deaf Lady Gougelly, who was aunt to a peer, and a desperate hand at whist.

Mr. Tharpe was a hard, dogmatical man of the law; indulging freely in sarcasm at the expense of his company, absolutely rude at times, and almost always delighting to support some wholly untenable thesis. The way in which he shifted his positions showed that he argued "for argument's sake;" but this is not the less vexatious to an opponent. His enemies declared that Dryden must have seen him with the eye of prophecy when he wrote:

Stiff in opinion — always in the wrong,
Is everything by turns, and nothing long.

As to being "nothing long," however, he had been a special pleader now for upwards of thirty years, and to such purpose, that he had amassed a large fortune; and as to being "always in the wrong," it is noteworthy that he seldom advanced an opinion — professionally — which results did not verify. Like all people who make a great parade of speaking the truth, he had no regard for any one's feelings; and often said a great many more unpleasant things than he really meant. And as this was the one virtue upon which some injudicious persons grounded their defence of him, it is not surprising that there were others who declared, that they preferred all his vices to his one virtue. Not that he *was* a vicious man — now, at all events, whatever his early career may have been; but that his stock-in-hand of principles might be summed up thus — to pay that thou owest, and flatter no man. He had not much idea, indeed, of rendering either unto God or unto Cæsar the things that were theirs. Of religion, he had as little as it is possible for any man to have, who ever thinks at all; a sort of vague Pantheism, with a horror of creeds and priestcraft. He, who was dogmatism itself, could not suffer that the Church should dogmatise to him. He had read a good deal in his day, and could quote Paley — to ridicule him; generally carried about a volume of Hobbes or Voltaire in his pocket; and on Sundays, as a pastime, often wrote parodies on Keble's *Christian Year* in doggrel rhyme.

In person he was short, thickset, with small grey eyes, which seemed literally to flash fire when he got excited; a long upper lip, and square massive jaw. The nose — and that feature alone — was like his son's, but smaller. Altogether, the face was one you were

not likely to forget, nor pleasantly to remember, if you had been half an hour in his company.

That Algernon Tharpe should be the son of such a man was one of those strange freaks of nature there is no accounting for. Excepting the feature we have just spoken of, they were absolutely unlike in all ways. The father's ambition was bitterly disappointed in his son. At first he had striven and worked, as few fathers work, to make him take a distinguished place at Rugby. It was long ere he would believe, what he might have seen years before, that the boy had only the most ordinary intelligence, and no application. He was always a favourite with both masters and boys; but that Mr. Tharpe held of small account. At this time of Algernon's life, during the holidays, his father was often very violent with him. The poor boy went to bed supperless over his Homer and his Virgil many a night; but neither talent nor the power for hard work seemed to be in him: Mr. Tharpe recognised this fact at last. Then, better days began for Algernon; inasmuch as his father no longer strove for what was clearly impossible. With a half-contemptuous shrug, he let him go to Oxford, and gave him as much money as he wanted. With apparent resignation to the inevitable, he heard that his son was plucked; but no one knew how the wound rankled inwardly. And now, who so keenly sensitive as Mr. Tharpe to all Algernon's shortcomings? to his awkwardness — to his dulness — to his fondness for bad music and worse poetry — for trashy melodramas and sensation-novels? Meanwhile, what was best and really valuable in the young man his father ignored. With a toleration almost akin to indifference, yet beneath which smouldered a passion

which occasionally threw out live coals of sarcasm, the father had got to regard his son. They dwelt under one roof; they met at breakfast and dinner; they talked about facts — they never discussed them, nor entered into abstract questions; then Algernon read the evening paper, and his father went to sleep. And this was a fair epitome of their daily life. Mr. Tharpe had smiled in scorn when some friend suggested Algernon's going into a profession. What could he do? What thing on earth was there he was fit for?

Upon the fact of his illegitimacy, and on the question of his future fortune, Mr. Tharpe had never spoken to his son. Of the slur on his birth Algernon knew nothing; but this he knew — his father had absolute control over his whole fortune. Algy had always plenty of money, but his tastes were not expensive. At Oxford he had not got into a single row; yet he was only two-and-twenty when he left. He was idle, as he always had been, but not vicious. His mornings were passed in smoking a pipe, over a railway novel, or in playing rackets; and he had a profound conviction, which Mr. Tharpe shared, that he was fit for nothing else.

When his sister (for whom he had, perhaps, a greater contempt than for any other human being, his son included) first hinted to Mr. Tharpe that Algernon was falling — if he had not already fallen — desperately in love, he simply laughed at the idea. "Hasn't it in him," was the remark, as he turned on his heel. When, however, this suggestion had been repeated several times, and when, by dint of watching Algernon closely, Mr. Tharpe really began to think there *was* something

the matter with the boy, he told his sister that he must see the girl.

"I haven't dined with you, Jane, since asparagus was last in season. I'll come on Saturday. Get the girl to meet me."

Little did Olivia guess the ordeal she was to undergo. She was so well used to her aunt's inflated statements, that she gave no second thought to Mr. Tharpe, senior. It flashed upon her as an amusing instance of the old lady's mode of interpreting a few civilities that she should really conceive that this boy was *in love* with her — Olivia — after eleven days' acquaintance! For, of course, she was sharp enough to see the real drift of Miss Pringle's remarks. And, equally of course, she saw that Algernon admired her, that he came to the house solely to see her, and that at her altar, and not at her aunt's, the first fruits of the year were offered up. But the idea of any serious attachment — it was too ridiculous! She saw that he had been very little accustomed to women's society, that he was not very happy at home, that he was shy and awkward — though honest as gold, and true as steel; and because of these things, she talked to him as she would never have done to a more self-assured young man.

And now, having shown in what frame of mind the chief actors in this little dinner-drama were, let us be present at their meeting in Mrs. Quintus Smith's drawing-room that Saturday evening.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Quintus Smith's Dinner-party.

MR. THARPE was standing with his back to the fire, in the centre of the rug. His sister was trying to talk to him, and gleaning choice morsels from the *Court Journal* she was cutting, to feed this very slow fire; but they were consumed like chaff, and after a momentary blaze died out, and nothing remained. Thus:

Mrs. Q. I see that Lord Dumberly — you remember him, Thomas, when he was a boy? — has been made Lord in Waiting.

Mr. T. In waiting for brains, which never come, I should think, from what I *do* remember.

Mrs. Q. (after a pause). Algernon, isn't this your great Rugby friend — "Lord George Toper, second son of the Marquis of Buttermere, has been presented to the living of Fattyville, worth 2000*l.* per annum."

Algernon. Yes. It's a family living. He always knew he was to have it. Oh! here they come. (This referred to a ring at the door-bell.)

Mr. T. When is he to be made a bishop, eh? What an apostolic condition of society we live in! He was rusticated twice from Oxford, if I remember right. How Fattyville will drink in the words of wisdom that fall from his lips!

Mrs. Q. (after another pause). Mrs. Hampton is *getting on*, I see; she has been entertaining the Duke of Battersea, Lord Islington, and others at her seat.

Mr. T. Humph! They're not the first, by a great many; — overflowing with the milk of human kindness.

Mrs. Q. (who is obtuse). But no birth, and very coarse manners. I never can see what men admire in her. For my part, I was always very cool to her formerly, when she lived near us, you know.

Mr. T. I wouldn't be so now, if I were you. She lives in Grosvenor-place, and has dukes to dine with her.

Here Miss Pringle and Olivia were announced. The elder lady minced, and ogled, and curveted at Mr. Tharpe, who never left his position on the rug, but bowed rigidly at her, while the introduction took place; and then, a few moments after, Mr. Harrington arrived, and every one was at his ease, as this invaluable talker did the work for them all.

Algernon had shuffled himself behind Olivia's chair as soon as she sat down; and there, in an under-voice, so that his father could not hear and laugh at anything he said, the poor fellow began some mild and disjointed talk, to which Olivia, with feminine tact, replied in much the same tone. She did not like the looks of Tharpe *père*. Knowing nothing of him, she yet made a shrewd guess that he inspired his son with more of unwholesome dread, mingled with admiration for his great intellectual superiority, than with a genuine filial affection.

As soon as Lady Gougelly came they went down to dinner; Olivia naturally falling to Algernon's lot. Mr. Tharpe was exactly opposite her; and whenever he was not employed in eating, or in contradicting, or sneering at some one, or in advancing some extraordinary opinion and waiting for some one to contradict *him*, he was watching Olivia. As to Algy, his voice, in dread of his father's sharp ears, sank to such

a whisper, that Olivia could not hear above one word in ten; and whenever she looked at him, she found his eyes, with the wistful expression of a dog's, glancing at Mr. Tharpe across the table. She little guessed that, in reality, he was watching with intense anxiety to try and detect what impression she, Olivia, had made.

"Harrington," said Quintus Smith, "have you heard that the Galvanic Battery Company is gone to smash?"

"No! You don't say so? Sorry to hear it: numbers of people ruined, I'm afraid — numbers."

"More fools they," observed Mr. Tharpe, sipping his soup.

"Come, Tharpe, that's hard now," cried the good-natured old bachelor. "It was reckoned a very good speculation."

"Who by? Did you ever hear of a speculation that wasn't reckoned good by some one?"

"The Poynters had a great deal in it," observed Mr. Quintus.

"I'm afraid nearly everything," said Mr. Harrington. "Poor Poynter! — good fellow — he went in for this so desperately. I tried in vain to point out to him —"

"Of course," snapped in Tharpe. "Always was a fool, and obstinate into the bargain. Just what one would expect he would do."

"Ah! he was talked over, you see — went in deeper and deeper — was convinced that he was going to make a colossal fortune — put in all his wife's money besides his own, so that I'm afraid he'll hardly have clothes left to his back."

"It's a broad one," said Mr. Tharpe; "and he'll be much better without clothes — an unhealthy result of civilisation; prevents the healthy action of the skin."

"Dear me! You don't say so?" struck in Miss Pringle. "But what — what do you suggest in lieu of — eh? *Something*, you know, for the sake of — eh, Mr. Tharpe?"

"A Turk thinks it indecent of you, madam, to go with your face uncovered. Our ancestors, in the fifth or sixth generation, would have blushed to see your bare neck and arms." (Miss Pringle pulled her lace mantle a little more over her.) "It is all a matter of conventionality, madam. The indecency is in your mind — in the idea you attach to anything — not in the thing itself."

"Really, Mr. Tharpe, I don't know what you mean. In my *mind*? Really —"

"I mean, my dear madam, that your mind, being a large one, should free itself from vulgar prejudices. Accustom your sex to the spectacle of —"

"No!" exclaimed the spinster, energetically; "that I never could do. Don't talk of it, Mr. Tharpe; you make me blush!" And she put up her fan.

"What are they saying?" screamed Lady Gougelly, who was deaf.

"Mr. Tharpe is advising Miss Pringle to — to wear less clothes — he! he! — for the benefit of science," replied Mr. Harrington, in an equally loud voice.

"Too early in the season yet to leave off anything," shouted the old lady, as grave as a judge.

Mrs. Quintus Smith, by way of changing the con-

versation, observed that it was warm for the time of year. Didn't Mr. Harrington think so?

Mr. Harrington did think so. He was not sure that he ever remembered it so warm in January. He further remarked that it was very early for peas.

"*We* had some last week," said Miss Pringle, nodding significantly across at Algernon, whereat the young man blushed.

"I hope it isn't true that Sextus Brown's wife is so ill, Mrs. Smith? I heard to-day that they were very anxious about her," said Harrington.

"I really don't know," replied the lady, playing with a morsel of sweetbread. "We don't visit. The Browns, you know, are quite in another set."

"Do you suppose they'll admit her into heaven?" asked Mr. Tharpe. "Hardly, I should think, as it is such a very exclusive place."

"She'll be an irreparable loss to Brown," said old Harrington, wisely ignoring the last remark. "Capital mother to his children — good wife, very — kind woman — an irreparable loss, I should say."

"That's an insult to the whole sex, Harrington," sneered Mr. Tharpe. "Are there not as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it? The last census shows that the female population of this country is greatly ahead of the male. Take care they do not rise *en masse* and punish you."

Mr. Tharpe caught the eye of one across the table who looked as if she would like to have punished *him*.

"Are you going to the next drawing-room, Lady Gougelly?" asked the hostess, making a feeble effort to be heard across Mr. Harrington and her brother.

"What does she say?" shouted Lady Gougelly.

"She asks if you are going to the drawing-room," repeated Quintus Smith, after his wife.

"Go into the drawing-room? Why? We've not done dinner, have we?"

"No — no — the *Queen's* drawing-room; the next, you know, at St. James's?"

"Never go!" screamed the old lady. "Last I was at was William the Fourth's. Too old now."

"The only sensible remark I have heard since I sat down," muttered Mr. Tharpe. Then aloud, he said, "I suppose *you* are going, Jane? The house of Smith must be represented, of course; family diamonds (hired for the occasion) and all the rest of it."

"I think it a great shame *you* don't go to court, Thomas. You really *ought* to go, and to present Algeron; oughtn't he, Mr. Harrington?"

"Of course — of course — proper respect to the Sovereign. Algy, my good fellow, we'll go to a levée together, if your father won't go, and —"

"Hire a cap and bells for him at Nathan's. That's the proper livery for every man in a free country who goes cringing and congeeing among sycophants at court. A suit of motley, too, would be more becoming to some figures than a court suit," and he smiled bitterly as he thought of his son's legs. Then changing his manner, he added, "What do we of the middle classes want at court, I should like to know? It is all very well for a set of aristocrats who go to intrigue and struggle for loaves and fishes, orders, and embassies, and sinecures, and patronage, and God knows what besides; and the women who expect to be asked to balls or concerts, or some rubbish of the kind; but what on earth have *we* got to do among them, I

should like to know? Royalty would much rather be without us; and as to the humbug of pretending you go there out of *respect*, you go out of the desire to see your names in the *Morning Post*; out of the desire to talk to your poorer friends about having been at court; out of the desire to wear fine clothes; out of the desire —”

“Oh!” interrupted his sister, losing all patience, “we know how democratic your views are upon such matters. But really, what you mean by speaking of yourself — of the Tharpes — as belonging to the *middle classes*, I am at a loss to understand. If you are going to throw down all barriers, all distinctions of birth, and call us ‘the middle classes,’ when you know our family dates more than four hundred years back — well, I have nothing to say,” and she sank back and half shut her eyes.

“Do you suppose there were no middle classes four hundred years ago? The Tharpe who lived then would have laughed at the idea of his belonging to anything else; but, probably, if you trace the family tree a little further, you will carry us back to a tinker; and with all my heart, I say.”

Mrs. Quintus Smith looked the disgust she felt.

“Oh! ho!” laughed Mr. Harrington. “If it comes to that, you know, Tharpe, there is a certain noble family whose origin can be traced to a scavenger. Why, our oldest aristocracy are mere mushrooms of yesterday, compared with the Austrians and Belgians. The De Cröys have an old picture of the Deluge, in which a servant in the De Cröy livery is seen hastening into the Ark with the family records! He! he! I’ll trouble you to find me anything like that in England.

Ha! ha! Miss Marston, take my advice, and don't refuse that *suprême de volaille* — does great credit to your cook, Smith. We had the same dish at the Freemasons' Tavern two nights ago. I give you my word, not to be compared to this."

"Ah!" said Mr. Tharpe, "that was the dinner of the Sympathisers with the South. I saw a report of it in the *Times*, with your speech, Harrington. I gave it my attentive consideration, and I could not, for the life of me, make out what you were driving at; but, apparently, you think slavery a very fine institution, and regret that the benighted state of feeling in England prevents its introduction here."

"What I said, my good sir, was this" — and then followed one of those wearisome discussions that we all knew too well at the time of the late war. It lasted till the end of dinner. Mr. Harrington bore all Mr. Tharpe's Juvenal-like bitterness of sarcasm most good-humouredly, and if his counter-arguments were not very forcible, they were at least pleasantly put.

It was just before the ladies were leaving the table that Mr. Tharpe, in reply to something his antagonist had advanced, said:

"I tell you that any tie which binds one human being to another irrevocably, is a hideous infringement of the great law of nature which made us free to choose and to change. I even go further and say, that I regard this to be true, in a certain degree, of marriage." (Cries of "Oh! oh! Mr. Tharpe!") "It is better than it *was*, since the law has made it possible for every poor man and woman to be rid of the very bad bargain they made, without spending a fortune; but consider, can anything be more absurd than that a foolish boy

and girl should rush blindfold into a contract which is to bind them *for life*? Who on earth can undertake to swear that he will love, cherish, and obey any one thirty years hence? It's a species of slavery, that's what it is, and, as such, impolitic and immoral, I am inclined to think. Indeed, I am not sure that it is not perjury prepense."

Algernon felt hot and uncomfortable. His father seemed to be taking unusual pains to appear to disadvantage in Olivia's eyes. But Lady Gougelly here screamed out:

"What is he making that long speech about?"

"About marriage," responded her host, trying to be as succinct as he could.

"Oh! very good," she shouted nodding and smiling at Tharpe; "never too late to mend!"

Poor old soul! she meant no harm. Her mind, in the fog of ages, only held by the fact that he was not married, that "there had been something or other, you know, years ago;" but that he was *supposed* to be a widower, and had a son, she had entirely forgotten at the moment. The person chiefly concerned looked as though he heard not. His sharp grey eyes remained steadily fixed on Olivia, and he never moved a muscle. Mrs. Quintus Smith got very red. Things were not going on well altogether. Brother Thomas *would* make himself so disagreeable, bringing forward all those horrid democratic and irreligious ideas; and now here was Lady Gougelly almost openly saying that he was never married! Only one person at table, it so chanced, however, had her curiosity roused by the untoward remark. Miss Pringle found an opportunity in the course

of the evening to ask Mrs. Quintus who her brother's wife had been? That lady was prepared.

"I really cannot tell you," she replied, loftily. "I never knew her. My brother and I quarrelled on the subject, and we never mention it."

It was clear that Miss Pringle was never to mention it either. But what woman ever rested satisfied with such an answer? Not an hour later she dragged from Mr. Harrington's reluctant lips the confirmation of what she now strongly suspected. But the only result was to make her feel that more caution would be necessary in dealing with Mr. Tharpe in this matter than she had anticipated. As to renouncing the idea for Olivia, Miss Pringle, on the contrary, looked upon the marriage now as almost a settled thing. For had she not overheard Mr. Tharpe say to his sister in the drawing-room, where she was making tea, "Much too good for him, Jane. She'll be dead sick of him in a week, if they marry"? Yet he had not addressed one single word to Olivia that evening. How could he know what she was? Because he had sharp ears, great observation, and the habit of rapidly forming his judgments, whether just or erroneous.

When Harrington bade his hosts good night, Tharpe followed him out of the room.

"Look here," he said, catching hold of him by the button, and frowning hard into the old bachelor's round smiling face. "You know that fellow Poynter well, don't you? You will be wanting, I suppose, to do something for him, as he has been fool enough to lose almost everything in this confounded speculation?"

"Well, I certainly wish; among his friends —"

"I'm not one of his friends. The man dislikes me particularly, because I told him once he knew nothing of law. If I send you a cheque for him to-morrow, it must be on your distinct promise that he is not to know who the money comes from, and that you say nothing about it to a human being. Will you give your word?"

"My dear Tharpe, this is most generous —"

"Hold your tongue, will you? — those women will hear you. Give me your word, that's all I want."

"I'm sure, my dear Tharpe —"

"Give me your word!" and he literally shook the rotund Harrington by the collar of the coat, which he held tight.

"There! — there! — I give you my word!" gasped Harrington. "God bless my soul! what a man it is!" and taking advantage of his release, he shuffled downstairs.

Poor Algernon, meantime, after passing an evening of feverish excitement, betwixt hopes and fears, anxieties, mortifications, and delights, took the opportunity of his father's absence from the room to say hurriedly to Olivia:

"Isn't my governor clever, Miss Marston? You *ought* to like him, because he's so awfully clever; and I'm sure he likes you — I know it by the way he looks. He never looks at any one like that, when he doesn't like them. I say, you don't mind all he says, do you? because he doesn't mean it, you know. He talks in that way, you know, just because it's a way he has, before people. He never talks to me like that. I'm not clever enough."

"What a blessing for you, poor boy!" thought Olivia.

Aloud, she observed, that as Mr. Tharpe had not spoken to her, she could form no opinion about him. Which was not at all true, for she had formed a very decided one.

Before they separated that evening, a party was arranged to go over the Mint, the following Tuesday. Mr. Tharpe was to be of this party, for he knew everything, including a director of the Mint.

CHAPTER V.

The Return of Old Friends.

ALGERNON'S father had opportunity given him to observe Olivia's conduct and manner again, on the afternoon in question. He even talked to her for a few minutes. Some evenings afterwards, when father and son were together over their wine, instead of settling himself fairly in his armchair for sleep, and inviting the young man to read the *Standard* aloud, Mr. Tharpe said, abruptly:

"Put down that paper, and listen to me. This is a very foolish business, in which, you may depend on it, you will get your fingers burnt. You fancy yourself desperately in love with this girl, do you?"

Algernon hung his head, and muttered something which was wholly unintelligible.

"You have only known her three weeks or so," continued his father, after a pause. "It is absurd to suppose you can really care much about her already;

but if this goes on you *will*, and you'll make a fool of yourself."

"I've liked her, sir," murmured Algernon, "for upwards of three months. I've known her — by sight, you know; and I never saw a girl who could hold a candle to her, and I never *shall* like any girl so well, that I'm sure. She's such a trump!"

"I'm inclined to believe she is — if she is not a confounded coquette. And that is the very reason," he added, with a little softening of his manner, "that you will have nothing more to do with her, if you are wise. Remember, I am only offering you my advice. Go on, if you choose; and if you succeed, I suppose I ought to think you are a devilish lucky fellow. At all events, I have no objection, and will do what I can to smooth matters for you. But you won't succeed. If I know anything of women, she has about as much idea of marrying you as of marrying the footman. That old harridan *has*; but the girl is just one of those high-souled, romantic, absurd creatures, who expect their husbands to be demigods, and not men, and who look down with a sort of protecting pity on fellows like you. It is cruel kindness, letting you singe your wings; she had better, by far, snub you, but she hasn't the heart to do it. Indeed, she doesn't guess that you are very deeply smitten, though I see the girl is sharp enough in most things."

"Of course, I know I'm not fit to be her shoe-black," began poor Algernon.

"Of course not," interrupted Mr. Tharpe, dryly; "and if you fully understand that she is a woman who will only take what she *believes*, at all events, to be

worthy of her, you won't subject yourself to the humiliation of a refusal."

"I know there are lots of clever chaps," said Algernon, ruefully, "who would marry her to-morrow, if they could; but I'm sure they couldn't love her better than I do — and she don't know them, you see. There she lives, shut up with that old aunt, never seeing a soul. And perhaps, in time, she may come round to think —"

"That living in Portman-square with you and me is better than living in Ormsby-crescent with that old devil? No, I tell you, she won't. She will emigrate, or go out as a governess, or gain an independence somehow, when she can't stand the life any longer; and I should think your aunt Jane would be the last drop in her cup that will make it overflow. One thing you may take your oath of — she will die an old maid, sooner than marry *you*."

This was not encouraging, for Algernon had the largest faith in his father's penetration; on any other subject but this, he would have been completely daunted. As it was —

"I shall go on trying," he said, in a low voice. "You see, sir, I can't be worse than I should be if I were to leave off going there now, and seeing her. She does me no end of good. You can't think what a lot of good I seem to get when I'm with her; and I should be just miserable — regularly stumped up, that's the truth, if I gave her up now. *She* must give *me* up — I can't do it myself."

"You must take the consequences, then," said Mr. Tharpe, shrugging his shoulders. And throwing him-

self back in his chair, he settled himself for his evening nap.

Things went on much in the same way I have described during the next six weeks. Tharpe the younger contrived, or his friends contrived for him, that he should meet Olivia most days. The poor fellow had said truly, that being with her did him good. Like Dick Steele, he felt that "to love her was a liberal education;" for she put thoughts, and aspirations, and glimpses of a higher life into him, which all the schools and colleges, and all his clever father's sarcasm, had never yet effected.

And was she to blame or not? Of course she could no longer be blind to this creature's absolute devotion; it shone out of his eyes, it was not to be mistaken in every chance word he uttered. Into this poor neglected boy's life, with a strong capacity for attachment, and susceptibility to right influences, the love of no tender mother, no wise and true-hearted woman, had yet entered. He was plain; he was shy and awkward; most people would call him dull, yet she saw that there were pleasant buds in his nature, which only wanted sunshine to make them blossom. His good instincts, his enthusiasm, if rightly directed, might surely be turned to some account. Like other mistaken women, she thought it possible to harden a passionate devotion into a Platonic attachment, and be of infinite use to this young man. And for entertaining this absurd and Quixotic idea a great number of her sex will, like Miss Pringle, call her a variety of ugly names.

But all things in due order. Up to the time we have yet reached, the aunt, with rare reticence, has forborne to hint at young Tharpe's devotion to the

niece since that day when she saw how necessary it was to use great tact in speaking to Olivia on the subject. She has been burning fifty times a day to say something, but experience has taught her that this niece is a difficult person to deal with, and that it is better to leave things to take their own course. "Nothing," as she says continually to Mrs. Quintus Smith, "*can* be going on more satisfactorily."

The Pomfrets were come to town. Two days after their arrival, an open landau drove up to Miss Pringle's door, soon after luncheon, and three ladies very smartly dressed in slight mourning got out.

A great deal of embracing, after the manner of all women, took place in the drawing-room, and a few tears were shed by Mrs. Pomfret. When Olivia thought over the meeting afterwards, she did not know how it had come to pass that they all seemed so much more intimate than they had been when they parted, eighteen months before.

Kate was altered outwardly, inasmuch as she was grown fatter, and that a Parisian hairdresser had rubbed up her hair the wrong way, and then cut it into short tags over her forehead. This, to the uninitiated, was hardly an improvement, perhaps; but then it looked foreign and fashionable. Mary, in virtue of her hair waving naturally, had been allowed to keep it much as nature intended; and a pretty girl she now was — bright-eyed, bright-cheeked — altogether a pleasant, cheery-looking English lass.

"We have taken a house in Eaton-place for the season; then we go down to Milton-Eyre, and you must come and pay us a long visit, my dear Olivia — the longer the better," said Mrs. Pomfret. "Indeed, if

you would come and stay with us *now*, in London, I'm sure we should be only too pleased to have you; only, as you don't go out, why you might find it dull, when I and the girls —"

"Oh," cried Miss Pringle, "I couldn't think of sparing her just now — I couldn't, indeed. And I am sure Olivia wouldn't leave me at this moment, would you now, my dear?"

"I think it would be better," Olivia answered, simply, "that I should pay Mrs. Pomfret a visit in the country, not in London, since she is good enough to ask me."

"I told you so," said Aunt Clo, nodding significantly at Mrs. Pomfret.

"Come and see us dressed for the drawing-room on Thursday, Olivia," said Miss Pomfret. "You will see Henry, too, who is going with us, and who wants to make your acquaintance: he has heard us talk so much of you."

Olivia promised she would go; and then Mrs. Pomfret asked about Rupert — when Olivia had last heard from him?

"A few days ago. He was quite well, and is almost in hopes, now, that he may be able to get home this spring. He asks particularly if I have heard of you all. I suppose, Mary, you are now quite an accomplished musician? I hear you have been working hard while you were abroad."

"A little. I hope to have singing lessons in London;" and the girls got away into a corner of the room together.

"Do you know, dear, we've a great secret — a *profound* secret — to tell you," whispered Kate; "only

you must promise not to tell, because it's only *just* settled, and none of her own relations are told yet; but Henry is engaged to Lady Helena Donnel, Lady Caerlavrock's daughter."

"She is so nice," said Mary.

"We knew her at Homburg last summer, and then we met at Dover again the other day, and Lady Caerlavrock was so very civil to us. And then Henry joined us, and he had flirted just a *little* with Lady Helena in the summer; and at Dover it all came on again, and the day before we came away it was all settled, and Lady Caerlavrock is to present us at the drawing-room."

"I am very glad it is a marriage you like," said Olivia.

"Oh, she's such a dear little creature," replied Mary; "so pretty, and so good — not the least fine or grand, you know."

"And the connexion is so very nice," put in Kate. "We are going to dine at her uncle's, Lord Dumberly's to-morrow evening, to meet a number of the family; but Lady Caerlavrock is very anxious that, at present, it should not be talked of."

Miss Pringle, meanwhile, was making *her* confidences, of a marriage in prospect, to Mrs. Pomfret. She believed her niece now had every chance of "settling well."

"You can understand, therefore, that I am anxious she shouldn't miss her *opportunity*. Everything depends on *that* in life, eh? I entirely attribute my not having married a baronet of large fortune to the fact of my leaving Cheltenham on a Saturday instead of a Monday. I had taken my place in the stage-coach a week before,

and I didn't like to lose my fare; but I have every reason *now* to suppose that had I waited — well, Mrs. Pomfret, I missed *my opportunity*. Now, as I say, Olivia may never have such a chance as this again. Fine fortune! Fine young man! (except perhaps his legs). Old family house in Portman-square — seat in Berkshire —”

“In Berkshire? Why, what's the name, Miss Pringle? Does he live near Milton-Eyre, I wonder?”

“Not very far, I think. Tharpe is the name,” said the old lady, hesitatingly. She was keeping the bar sinister in the background, and began to be afraid her visitor knew all about it. It was annoying when she blew so loud a flourish for a crack to be found in her trumpet.

“Oh!” whistled Mrs. Pomfret, drawing in a long breath, “I know all about them — I have *heard* of them, that is to say. Mr. Pomfret tells me they have some little cottage near us. I hear the father is an odious man — no morals, no religion, nor anything; and the son, I am told, is dull and awkward, but very much to be pitied — treated so badly by the father, and — I suppose you know, Miss Pringle, that the son is not — hem!” And she filled the hiatus by an expressive nod.

“Well, I have heard there was some little informality,” said Miss Pringle, colouring, and trying to put a bold face on it. “But, you see, it makes no difference as regards fortune — *recognised*, you understand, eh? Quite brought up as the heir, Mrs. Pomfret; and in Olivia's position —”

“If *she* likes it, my dear Miss Pringle, of course I have nothing to say. Still I think she *might* do better.

It is a very inferior match. When I think of my dear angel boy, and what she might have had in *him*, if she had chosen! Ah, how anxious I was for that! And who knows but what he might be here now, if they had married as I wished? That dear boy tried his constitution so!"

"So I suppose," said Miss Pringle, dryly, in her turn.

"You never were a mother," began Mrs. Pomfret again, with her handkerchief to her eyes; and she stopped inopportunately.

"No, I never was," said the spinster.

"Therefore you cannot understand a mother's feelings. No one *can* understand my loss in that dear boy."

As there was another pause, Miss Pringle thought herself called upon to say:

"Certainly, certainly; oh, I can well believe that, Mrs. Pomfret."

"And when I think of all Olivia lost in him, Miss Pringle, I can't reconcile myself to the idea of her putting up with something so — so very inferior, in every way. Of course, if she is to be happy, poor dear girl, I wouldn't mar her happiness by a word of mine."

"No, of course not," chimed in Miss Pringle.

"But I cannot think that what with the birth, and the father, and altogether ——"

"The young man, Mrs. Pomfret, is quite *devoted* to her; and I know, by my *own* experience, what *that* will effect. I was once very near accepting a man of low birth, with one eye, and without a shilling; and all because of his persistent devotion. What that man

went through for me words can never express. I should have fallen a victim to my compassion, I believe, but that the poor wretch was put into gaol for forgery. And it is quite evident, Mrs. Pomfret, that Olivia *is* very much touched by this young Tharpe. I have no doubt now that it will all be arranged in the course of a few days."

"You don't say so, Miss Pringle. Well, well!"

"Yes, and I do hope, Mrs. Pomfret, you will never drop even a hint to her — eh? you understand."

"Oh, of course not — as I said before; and I am sure I *hope* she may be happy," sighed Mrs. Pomfret, rising at the same moment. "Come, girls, we must be going. You will spend the morning with us on Thursday, then, Olivia?"

And with more embracings the Pomfrets departed.

They were scarcely out of the room before Aunt Clo burst out —

"Well, I think she might have invited *me*! But Mrs. Pomfret is really grown such a silly, absurd woman! The way in which she goes on about that horrid son of hers who died ——"

"Remember he *is* dead, aunt."

"That doesn't prevent his having been a rude, vulgar little wretch, Olivia, when he was alive. And then, if she didn't depreciate every one else at his expense, I shouldn't care. But to go on as she does!"

"Who is it she depreciates at his expense?" asked Olivia, rather curious.

"Oh! never mind who. Every one. And then, the absurd way they have been and dressed that girl!"

"Yes. I don't think it becoming; but she tells me it is the last fashion."

"Like a cockatoo! And I don't think much of the other girl, either, that Mr. Harrington made such a fuss about; no style — no *tournure*."

"To my mind she is charmingly pretty."

"Well, going abroad has done them no good, I think, any of them. They are very much stuck up, and seem to think the Pomfrets of Milton-Eyre Abbey mighty fine people! She never said a word about *my* visiting them. I'm sure I don't want to go; and I hope, Olivia, that just at present you won't be going there *much*, either. Making the fuss you do about your mourning, and so on, it will be vastly inconsistent if you ——"

"It would be very inconsistent if I went to the Quintus Smiths, who are strangers, and could not go to my old friends," said Olivia.

Miss Pringle snorted out some sharp rejoinder. She was thoroughly put out. Mrs. Pomfret had discovered the crack in that brass instrument of hers; and she certainly had not been pressing in her civilities to the old lady.

CHAPTER VI.

Miss Pringle's Diplomacy.

A CRISIS was now fast approaching; and it was Miss Pringle who finally effected it.

That evening the whist-party met, and "the young people," as they were called, were left, as usual, virtually alone. Olivia talked to Tharpe more seriously of himself and of his future than she had yet done.

She spoke of the dignity of work; of the importance in life of having a definite object; of every man's capacity for usefulness in his generation, and of the contemptible career of a *fainéant*. She tried thus to incite him to exertion; and while he listened to her, it seemed that nothing would be impossible, that even desk-work in a City office would be better than sitting down idle with his hands before him; that there was no drudgery from which he would shrink, if he could only hear her voice urging him on. The conversation was in a low tone, for Olivia did not care that the whist-players should hear all she said; so Miss Pringle only caught an occasional word drifted towards her. At the end of the evening that lady found a moment to say privately to Algernon that she should like to see him the next afternoon, if he could manage to call about four o'clock; and then they separated.

The particulars of this interview I need not detail, since we shall glean enough of it presently. Suffice it that Olivia was asked to do a commission for her aunt at Marshall and Snelgrove's, and that a few minutes after she had left the house Algernon Tharpe called, and was admitted to Miss Pringle.

That evening Mr. Tharpe got a musk-scented note.

"MY DEAR SIR, — Will it be intruding too greatly on your *valued* time, if I request the *great* favour of a visit from you, at your *early* convenience, and at any *hour* you are so *amiable* as to appoint?

"Believe me, my very dear sir, with every expression of my *esteem*,

"Yours *most* sincerely,

"CLORINDA PRINGLE."

Mr. Tharpe tossed the note into the fire.

"Just as I expected," he muttered. "But I suppose I must go to the old hag. The sooner the bubble bursts, the better for him."

Algernon floundered into the room after his wont at this moment. The father, who read his son's face like a book, though he never seemed to look at it, saw that he had something of which he wanted to unburthen himself.

"Well — what is it?"

"You must get me, if you please, sir, something to do. I can't be idle any longer; I must do something, I don't care what. A fellow can't be doing nothing always, however stupid he is; and I begin to feel the value and dignity of work, which ——"

"The dignity of fiddlesticks!" said his father.

"No, sir; I'm quite in earnest;" and he got very red. "I am, indeed, and I hope you'll believe me, and let me try and do something. I'm so ashamed of seeing you work so hard every day, and to think that I'm kicking my heels about, doing nothing."

"Since when did these virtuous resolves come upon you? I was not aware that you were so penetrated with 'the dignity of work' either at Oxford or elsewhere. And all these months, since you left college, I have failed to perceive that inaptitude for idleness you speak of."

"Well, sir, a fellow may change; I suppose. 'It's never too late to mend,' I hope. Of course, I know I'm not as sharp as some fellows, and I dare say I shall be an awful muff at a desk, for a time; but perhaps I may get better after a while. At all events,

I should like to see if I'm too great a fool to do *any* thing."

"Is it the young lady who has been putting you up to this?" said Mr. Tharpe, after a pause.

"Well, she has—talked to me about — about —"

"The 'dignity of work'?" suggested Mr. Tharpe, with a sarcastic smile. "I see where you have got the catch-word. And has she promised to have you, pray, if you become a good boy, and sit at a desk so many hours a day?"

"No, oh! no; but I'm certain she never will marry me as long as I do nothing. She said last night she couldn't understand any woman caring for a man who was utterly idle and useless. So I'm determined to work — at a farm, if I can't do anything else."

The simplicity and vehemence of the young man were too much even for Mr. Tharpe. He had not believed in the possibility of his son's expressing his determination so strongly. He looked up, quite surprised, with elevated eyebrows.

"Really," he said to himself, "if the girl would have him (which she won't), it is just possible she might make something of him. She has infused a little fire into the clay already. Rather an uncommon girl. I said so when I first looked at her; and I'm never wrong. Curious instance of influence. If she were to succeed? but no! She'll never marry him."

Aloud, he said:

"I am going to see the aunt to-morrow."

Algernon Tharpe knew what this meant. He kicked at the legs of his chair, and fidgeted to that extent that his father exclaimed:

"Why on earth can't you sit still?"

"I saw her to-day," blurted out Algernon at last. "You'll do what you can for me, sir? It isn't money, I mean, but I think — perhaps — if you were to speak for me — to see Miss Marston — if her aunt insists on — on —"

"Coming to an understanding? 'Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée,' in short. She is quite right. However, I tell you beforehand it will be *fermée*. I would have spared you this, weeks ago — but you wouldn't listen to reason."

"Oh, sir! do you think there is no chance?"

"Perfectly useless discussing that. I will tell the aunt to-morrow what I propose doing for you. You had better see the girl yourself in the evening."

"Do you think, perhaps, if you were first to see her —"

"What is the use? If she is to be persuaded at all into this, I suppose it must be by *your* eloquence — by your swearing that she is your guardian angel — and all that stuff. I couldn't talk such rubbish. You must have the courage to take your answer from her own lips yourself. As to what you first spoke about — that fine phrase 'the dignity of work,' and so on — if you are in earnest a month hence, if this doesn't turn out to be a sudden spasm of energy, produced by flirtation, and dying out when you haven't seen the girl for a few weeks, why, I will buy you a share in some business, and you can drive down to the City and turn over a few ledgers daily, and fancy you are hard at work."

"Thank you, sir," said Algernon, and he heaved a deep sigh.

He felt he couldn't read the paper aloud that night;

he was too anxious and miserable. So he stumbled out of the dining-room as quietly as he could, after dinner, and walked round and round the square, smoking a pipe, with his hands driven deep into his pockets. Poor Algy!

At twelve o'clock next day, Mr. Tharpe was sitting alone with Miss Pringle, Olivia being gone to the Pomfrets, according to their appointment. The old lady was a little nervous, now that the moment had arrived for this all-important interview; but she had written down the heads of what she had to say, on a slip of paper which she held in her hand. Mr. Tharpe, by his terse, business-like way, however, though he frightened her, arrived at the pith of her discourse, and disposed of it in no time. After listening to her flowery little involutions for some minutes, he interrupted her.

"I think, ma'am, I know all you mean to say. If you'll allow me, I will spare you the trouble of running on with a list of useless questions. You saw my son yesterday. You learnt from him that he means to marry your niece, if he can. And now, before he actually proposes, you want to know whether he has my sanction, and what I will give him? What settlement I will make upon her and upon her children? Good. My reply is this. Every man is a free agent, and I should never dream of interfering with my son, if he chose to marry the kitchen-maid. I had rather he married your niece than the kitchen-maid, however; not from any absurd prejudice about birth, but because I think it is the only chance of making anything of him. The girl seems to have some influence over him at present. Probably it won't last, if they marry; but

it is just possible it may. I settle half my fortune upon my son, and on his heirs for ever, the day he marries; seventy thousand pounds."

"Well! I'm sure, Mr. Tharpe, it is vastly generous of you, and —"

"He will make what settlement he chooses upon your niece. I have nothing to do with that. As to the other half of my fortune — though I should double it before I die — I desire it should be distinctly understood that I pledge myself, in no way, as to the disposition of it at my death."

"Oh!" said Miss Pringle. "You look forward, I suppose, Mr. Tharpe, to the possibility of — of —"

"Marrying? No, madam, I don't. I look upon marriage altogether as a mistake, and the woman doesn't live to whom I would be tied for the remainder of my life. But I may choose to become a Mussulman, or go to the Cape and have a small Hottentot family —"

"Oh, Mr. Tharpe!"

"Or I may found an asylum for spinsters, Miss Pringle. In short, I mean to be free to dispose of half my fortune as I think fit. It is well that you should clearly understand this."

"Oh! certainly; by all means. And relative to what you were saying about spinsters, it reminds me to speak upon another little point, Mr. Tharpe. My position will be very lonely, as you may well believe, without the darling girl, when —"

"Why, madam, she has only been with you five or six months, has she? You must have got on for seventy years before that pretty well alone."

"*Seventy years!* Ha! ha! Oh! I see you're joking."

I can take a joke as well as any one, I am glad to say. What was I going to — Oh! about my living with them when they marry. Don't you think it would be a very comfortable nice arrangement?"

"For you, madam? Yes. Not for them."

"No? Seriously, now, why not? Olivia is sadly wanting in experience, sadly. When I lived with them at the Cedars, it was astonishing the use I was to her — about scolding the servants, and keeping things in order — and then her dress, too; hasn't an idea about it. I am confident I should save her a clear two hundred a year, eh?"

"It would be dear at the price, madam, I think," said her visitor, quite gravely. But she heeded him not.

"Then there are many things about the young man — his deportment, and so forth — in which, with my knowledge of the best society, I could improve him vastly. You will forgive me for saying so, eh? If there should be any little matrimonial differences, too, as *will*, we know, arise sometimes, the wholesome restraint of a third party —"

"If you mean a third *person*, that there probably will be. A whole *party*, or, indeed, more than three, would, I fancy, be *de trop*."

"Eh? — a third person? Who? — who do you mean — eh?"

"Myself, madam. My house is large enough, and if they choose to live in it, they can. They need see no more of me than they think fit; and the day they get tired of this arrangement they can take up their bed and walk. In the mean time, it strikes me, we are counting our chickens very considerably before

they are hatched. You ought to know the young lady better than I do, so I say nothing. The boy had better come and talk to her this evening. Good morning to you. I have an appointment at half-past twelve, and it wants five minutes, I see."

He was gone before she could say anything; had jumped into the hansom which was waiting for him, and was on his way to the City before she had recovered her breath. Wonderful was the mental and bodily elasticity of this man: as Miss Pringle watched his agile figure and quick wiry step, she could not help contrasting all his movements with the elephantine agility of his son. Could she have guessed that before he had turned the corner of the crescent he had dismissed the whole question of his son's marriage, for the time being, from his mind, and was deep in certain law papers which he drew out, her wonderment would have been great indeed.

Miss Pringle was a philosopher in her way. Though she had not got all she wanted, though Algeron Tharpe might never have *all* his father's money, and though it was pretty clear Miss Pringle was never to set up her household gods in Portman-square, or wherever else "the young people" might live, yet three thousand a year was not to be scorned by a penniless girl; and there were very solid advantages to be secured to Olivia by this marriage, which her far-seeing aunt did not overlook.

The pity was, that Miss Pringle would build and furnish this castle, with the basket of unhatched eggs still upon her head.

Olivia did not return till just before dinner. She had been kept by Mrs. Pomfret, during the girls' ab-

sence with Lady Caerlavrock at the Drawing-room; and she had spent these hours alone with their mother. It had been more than woman's nature could withstand, not to "drop a hint" of what Miss Pringle had told her; and in spite of her promises to the contrary, little by little, it all oozed out. I am bound to say she did not try and prejudice Olivia against the marriage. She believed that the girl was at least reconciled to the prospect, if not actually in love with it; and her amazement was proportionally great when she learnt the truth. Olivia was indignant with her aunt. Was it not enough that Miss Pringle should, in some mysterious way, have estranged Olivia's dearest and best friend from her? Had she not caused her enough of misery in the last four months? Was this Olivia's reward for having striven, as well as she could, against her disinclination for all society — that her aunt must fabricate this ridiculous story about her, and spread it abroad, too?

There was a thundercloud on her brow as she entered her aunt's drawing-room.

"Quite time to dress for dinner, my dear," quoth the old lady, in a sprightly voice; "and young Mr. Tharpe is coming this evening. Well, and how did the girls look? and what did they wear? and did Kate have her head like a cockatoo — eh?"

Olivia did not answer a word. She sat there for a minute, looking straight before her, black and impassive. Then she said:

"Pray, what makes you ask Mr. Tharpe to come here alone?"

"What, my dear? — alone, eh? — alone? Well, you know, I thought he would like it, and——"

"But *I* don't like it. Therefore I shall go up to my room, and remain there."

"Nonsense! go up to your room? I never heard such nonsense! What do you suppose I'm to do with the young man?"

"I don't know. That is your affair: you asked him."

"But he comes to see *you*; of course you know that very well. You're not a perfect fool, Olivia; and though you were quite angry when I *hinted* at such a thing weeks ago, and so I never have said anything more about it, yet of course it's quite ridiculous to suppose that you don't know *why* he comes here. And this evening particularly, I have reason to know that——"

"Very well, then; this evening I shall see him. It is time there should be an end of this."

"What do you mean, Olivia? — what *do* you mean? You can't mean to say that — that. It would be too abominable and *heartless* conduct of you, after encouraging the poor young man as you have done, if — if you were to throw him over now! I can't believe it of you."

She waited for a reply, but Olivia did not open her lips.

"If there is *one* thing that I have a *horror* of more than another," continued Aunt Clo, "it is a *coquette*. To sport with a man's feelings is a thing which, in the wildest days of my beauty, no one could ever accuse *me* of doing. I cannot — no, I cannot believe that any one who has the Pringle blood flowing in her veins will be found to behave in so *shameful* a manner."

She warmed with her subject. She inferred from Olivia's continued silence that she must be impressed; so she went on:

"The evenings you have spent with him beside you there! and the way, I'm sure, in which I've heard you talk to him about *life* and things. What's the use of talking to a man about life if you're not going to marry him? And the fresh vegetables he has sent, and the fowls from the country, and the hams — I'm sure if it was all brought into a court of law, no one *would* believe it.

"Such an amiable young man, too! and his father with a clear six thousand a year *now*, and likely to make ever so much more. And the house in Portman-square, and nice little place in the country, and all.

"Not that any *worldly* motives would influence *me* — and I'm sure no one can say that I have ever urged it on you, or fostered it in any way. It has been all your *own* doing; and I must say, most ungrateful and heartless to me it will be if, after all I have done for you, you go and throw away your chance of settling. What do you expect, I wonder? To be Duchess of Devonshire, perhaps? And then, when you consider your brother, and the burden you will be to him when he returns, and how wounded he will naturally feel when he finds you have thrown away such a chance.

"I'm sure, if your poor mother were alive——"

Here Olivia got up suddenly, and left the room. She could stand, with more or less patience, a great deal; but not to hear certain names coupled by her aunt with doctrines of expediency and worldliness.

She had listened without a word of reply thus far, because she wished to know, from her aunt's own lips, that Mrs. Pomfret had not mistaken or overstated the position in which Tharpe was supposed to stand towards Olivia. She had listened, without a word in reply, moreover, because she was afraid to trust herself to speak. This state of things was not to continue: she had made up her mind, to-day, that it was impossible to go on thus. And, so long as she remained an inmate of her aunt's house, there were things that were better left unsaid.

CHAPTER VII.

Algernon gets his Answer.

THE tête-à-tête dinner which followed was an uncomfortable piece of business. Aunt Clo's irritation found its only vent upon the servants. She sent for the cook, and rated her because the mint sauce had too much sugar in it; she sent for the housemaid, and scolded her because she had lit the fire badly, and it was gone out; she even began an angry remonstrance with Fritz, upon the lamp not burning, but a look from that worthy stopped her. Only between Olivia and herself no word passed. The dishes were handed round in a horrible silence: then the coffee was brought, and they went upstairs.

Should she speak to her again upon this subject? or was it better to say nothing more, and to leave the young man's eloquence, haply, to complete what her exhortation had begun before dinner? Miss Pringle would have added several stronger phrases, which she

had then forgotten to employ; but in all her dealings lately with Olivia she had been governed by the conviction that a love of opposition was strong in her niece, and that to insure a certain line of conduct, the less it was urged on her the better. She was on the horns of a dilemma: she burned, yet was afraid to speak; and so she kept dropping her stitches, and looking up out of the corner of her eye at Olivia, who, to all appearance, was reading tranquilly on the sofa, until a loud but fluttering knock was heard at the hall door.

"I will see Mr. Tharpe in the dining-room," said Olivia, rising. "I prefer seeing him alone, if you please;" and she moved to the door.

"No, my dear, *I* will go away," cried Aunt Clo, starting up and running towards her. "You must see him here; it would be too particular if you were to meet him *down*-stairs, and seem like — like I don't know what. You must see him here — quite naturally, you know, eh? — as if nothing — eh? And oh! my dearest Olivia, my dear, *dear* child, *pray* do nothing rash — pray don't — I——"

The door opened, and Fritz announced Mr. Tharpe. Miss Pringle whisked past him, with a hasty "good evening." She was going up-stairs for a short time: when tea was ready Olivia would ring for her.

He came in, poor fellow, more awkwardly than ever, holding his hat before him as though he were begging an alms. The clothes on his back were good clothes, and made by the best of tailors, yet somehow they seemed to hang on him like rags; the shirt he wore was spotless, yet it looked as though he had got

into it by running at it full tilt, like a clown at a paper hoop.

He shook her violently by the hand, and then sat down; doubtless unconscious that Olivia remained standing by the table, where she had received him. She was just a little nervous, which was, perhaps, the reason she spoke more slowly and softly than usual.

"I wanted to talk to you, Mr. Tharpe, which is why my aunt is gone away."

"Is it? Oh, I'm awfully glad, Miss Marston, because there are such a lot of things I want to say to you, and I was afraid I shouldn't see you alone."

"Well, now, everything you have to say to me you must say this evening; as we may not meet again, perhaps, for a long time. But, understand me, I hope nothing will interfere with our friendship. I shall always have a sincere regard for you."

"What do you mean by our not meeting again? Oh, Miss Marston."

"That I am going to leave my aunt — for a time, at all events. We are therefore not likely to meet often."

"Where are you going? Oh, Miss Marston! If you only knew all you were to me! I can't speak a bit, you know. I can never make you understand how different *I* am, how different everything in the world seems, since I knew you! I'd walk barefoot for you all over the world, if you told me. There's nothing I wouldn't try to do, if you'd give me some hope that you'd look on me by-and-by. Don't go away! don't, oh, don't! What shall I do when you're gone? What's a fellow to do whom nobody cares about? and just as

I was going to work so hard, and when I was fool enough to think, to hope....."

"I am afraid that others are to blame if you have deceived yourself," she said at last, seeing that he stopped. "I find that my aunt and Mrs. Quintus Smith, between them, have very foolishly conceived an idea that we might marry. I was in hopes you had not seriously adopted this idea. I saw that you liked me, but I thought my manner must sufficiently show you that, as it seemed fated we were to meet so constantly, I wished you to look upon me as a friend. Why should you have disturbed this state of things? I have a sincere interest in you, Mr. Tharpe, but under no possible circumstances could I ever be your wife."

He put both his elbows on the table, and buried his head in his hands.

"I was a fool," he sobbed. "I ought to have known that it was impossible for a girl like you to care for a fellow like me. The governor said so, and he's always right, — but I *did* think, I *did* hope, from your being so kind — that after a long time, perhaps — when I had worked, and done all you told me, Miss Marston —"

"Good heavens! Is it possible that a few commonplace words of advice can be so misunderstood? Do you, like my aunt, accuse me in your heart because I have talked to you here, evening after evening, and have taken an interest in your welfare — yet never dreamt of being your wife? What did I ever do that led you to form such a hope? You are silent. You will do me the justice to say that you have been deceived by others, not by me."

"Oh — it is all my own fault — no one else to blame, only my own blindness and folly."

"Not quite, I think. I believe that, left to yourself, you would not be here now; our injudicious friends have urged this on; and perhaps, as it happens, it is better so. We were both in a course of self-deception. I thought you understood what my feeling towards you was, and you — but we will talk no more of it. After a little time you'll forget this folly, and then we shall meet as old friends, I hope."

"I don't care what becomes of me. I think I shall go to Australia," said Tharpe, with his head still buried in his hands.

"It would be better than doing nothing," she replied.

"What's the use of a fellow trying to work with no one to encourage him? If I could only see you once or twice a week — my God! it's hard for a fellow to get on, without any one to care what becomes of him. I shall take to knocking about at night, I suppose, like most of the chaps I know — not that I like it — but just to prevent thinking."

"No, I am sure you won't do that. It would give me too much pain to think that I had been the unwitting cause of harm, when I hoped only to do you good. If we are to continue friends, as I trust, you must promise to try and get rid of this foolish fancy of yours as soon as possible, to set yourself to work at something in real earnest; above all, not to sink in your own estimation and mine by taking to low courses."

"As to the first, ah! how *can* I promise? and then I don't feel as if I ever could work unless I saw you.

You're not going out of London, are you? I may come and see you, mayn't I, wherever — wherever it is?"

"I think you had better not, for a time. By-and-by, when you can look at this calmly and dispassionately, I shall see you very often, I hope, and you shall talk over all your difficulties with me. But just now the thing is to show how manfully you can bear a disappointment, how bravely you can fight in the ranks of life, without even the poor help of a woman's voice to cheer you on."

"It's all very fine talking," said Algy, with some bitterness. "You don't know what it is to be all alone in the world, and to find some one you can love with all your heart and soul, and then to lose her. And to have a father who — who — who is ashamed of one — there! and who thinks one even a greater ass than one is. How am I to work, with the governor sneering at me all the time? I shouldn't have minded him, or anything, with *you* — but alone — I know I shall break down — I know I shall."

"Are you the only person in the world who suffers? Are there not many, think you, who want love and sympathy? many who are separated — for ever," here her voice trembled, "from all they hold dearest upon earth? Do you think *I* am not lonely also? — I who buried my dearest father scarcely six months ago, whose only brother is at the other end of the world, whose only other relation, living, is this old lady? I am a poor dependent woman, who cannot go out into the world and work, but am compelled to sit at home and do nothing. If your lot is a hard one, others have their troubles, too."

"Poor and dependent," he murmured, and repeated the words more than once. "Do you think the time may *never* come when you may change your mind, Miss Marston? To think of you as *poor* — I can't bear it. And the governor, you know, is a rich man. The idea of *your* wanting money, and *I* — no — I can't bear it! I say, — is there any one thing on earth, however small, you'll let me do for you?"

"The day may come when I may call on you; I shall do so without hesitation, if I require a true friend. I am sure you are one. As to my being poor, you rather misunderstand the sense in which I used the word. It is true I'm not rich; but I have quite enough for all my wants, — even if I should be driven to living alone."

"To living *alone*? You're not going to do that, surely?"

"Not at present, at all events. But I do not think it likely I shall return to my aunt."

"Oh, Miss Marston! Where are you going now, then?"

"To the Pomfrets — probably on a long visit. What I shall do, after that, depends on circumstances. I dare say we shall meet in Berkshire, however, in the course of the summer."

"In the course of the summer!" he repeated, and heaved a deep sigh.

"And, remember, I shall make many inquiries about you, in the mean time, and I shall expect to hear of your working hard. And now I shall ring the bell for tea," she added, after a pause, seeing that he had nothing further to say, but was capable of sitting there till midnight, in a gloomy reverie.

She walked towards the bell.

"No," starting up, and nearly upsetting the table, "let me go away first, — I can't meet the old lady — I can't, indeed. Let me get out of the house before you ring. Good-bye, Miss Marston, and God bless you! I can't obey you in *all* — I wish I could — but if I don't think of you, I know I can't work, and for your sake I'll try, that I will."

He gulped down his tears, and wrung her hands, till she nearly screamed; and then he bolted downstairs and out of the house, with such a clatter as made Aunt Clo (waiting at her open bedroom door for her summons) run down to the drawing-room instantly to find Olivia.

* * * *

Over that scene between aunt and niece I draw a veil.

Olivia's resolve to accept Mrs. Pomfret's invitation, and thus escape from her aunt's home, which had become absolutely intolerable to her, was in no wise affected by this interview. Miss Pringle railed, and cried, and stormed to no effect. Algernon Tharpe had had his *congé*; and Olivia had arranged to move to Eaton-place the next day.

In this resolve I think she was wise. Her life would have been a burthen to her, from that day forwards, for many a long week, had she remained in Ormsby-crescent. Mrs. Pomfret had urged all this upon her this afternoon, and Olivia's removal to her friend's house had been settled between them. Fritz, who declined to remain with Miss Pringle, was to go on a holiday of indefinite duration to his friends in Germany. For Olivia could not say what the length of her visit

to her friends might be. It would depend on circumstances; and chiefly, perhaps, on Rupert. In his last letter he spoke of his almost certain return this spring, and it was already the end of February. Olivia had been six months an inmate of her aunt's house; and it was more than four months now since she had heard of Mr. Thompson. Those months had seemed like years to her.

CHAPTER VIII.

Two Lives in Paris.

WE left our solitary friend, the painter, on the bridge at Rouen, one day towards the end of October. He has been wandering through France since then; loitering among cathedraled cities; turning off from the high roads, whithersoever fancy led him, to visit some storied ruin, or unravel the tangled windings of a river.

Nature was no doubt his best friend, as he was so fond of asserting in those days; yet his best friend was unable to distract his thoughts, and dissipate the gloom which had settled on him more heavily than ever since he left England. He was quite alone; and, during these wanderings, he neither met nor made an acquaintance. He worked, but his work profited him little. By the force of a strong will he obliged hand and eye to do the tasks he appointed unto them; and studies from nature, made in all sorts of weather, testified to his diligence. But there was very little of himself — of the man's mind — in it all.

He had meant to go on into Spain; but early in February business called him to Paris. It was here that a letter from an old friend of his — and an acquaintance of ours — wrought a change in some of his plans, as it turned out. Mr. Harrington, that hearty old bachelor, the *bienvenu* wherever he went, the most thoroughly “well up” of all diners out in every one’s affairs, had occasion to write to Mr. Thompson, whom he had known since the latter was a boy. At the end of his letter occurred this passage:

... “I went down to Tharpe’s last Saturday for a couple of nights. I had not been at Westbridge since I visited you, four years ago. What changes in that time! The only piece of news I heard there, which may interest you, is that old Sargent is now so bad that he cannot last many months. *D.T.*, twice since Christmas! It will be a great relief to you — indeed to *all* — when he is taken. We were a man’s party: the new judge, White, Matthews of the Inner Temple, and two other men. Young Tharpe was there, looking very miserable, and treated with such sarcasm by his father that I felt for the poor lad. Just now too, when he is hopelessly in love (a very foolish business, concocted by that goose, his aunt), it is especially hard on him; and I shall not be surprised if his father drives him to the deuce in the end, though he is quiet and steady enough now. The Pomfrets have not yet taken possession of Milton-Eyre. There is a rumour that the son is going to be married; but I have not yet been able to learn to whom. I hear he is a fine young fellow, and that a number of women have been in love with him, even before he became a great *spec*, as he did by his brother’s death, nine months ago.”

Mr. Thompson had always felt an interest in Algernon Tharpe. It may be remembered that when he visited the father some months before he asked particularly after the son. A vague idea of what now shaped itself into a definite suggestion may possibly then have crossed his mind. But, if so, he was too deeply absorbed with other matters, which lay closer to his heart, to think much about it. The impression of the young man's position returned to him with double force, however, as he read that passage in Harrington's letter. Old Tharpe was enough to drive any son to commit some desperate deed. And here was a poor lad, on whom no tenderness had ever been lavished, to compensate for the cruelest wrong a parent can inflict upon a child — who might be cast on the world to-morrow, with scarcely the bare necessities of life, after being bred in luxury — treated almost as though he were a *crétin*, and now, at the moment when apparently he most wanted sympathy, made the butt of his father's caustic irony. Thompson's own condition may, moreover, have led him to feel a peculiar pity for the man who was young enough to be his son, in this, his first grief of the heart. After balancing the matter over in his mind for an hour or two, he resolved to write to old Tharpe, and propose that his son should join him, and go with him to Italy for three or four months. This was not the light, unimportant proposal it would have been from many men; to Thompson it involved the sacrifice of considerable personal comfort; and in his present frame of mind it cost him no small effort to accept the constant companionship of one with whom he could have little or nothing in common.

Mr. Tharpe answered in very much the strain that might have been expected from him. His son was free to go where he liked. He had conceived an absurd idea about becoming a business man. But there was no opening, just at this moment, in any first-rate house that Mr. Tharpe knew of. Inquiries were being made; in the mean time his son might as well bore himself in Italy as in London, if he chose. "Cœlum non animam," &c. &c.

The son, in a short, awkward letter, accepted. It is probable that he would have accepted anything that took him away from his father just then. But he had a clear recollection of Thompson's kindness to him in schoolboy days, long ago. He had not seen him since those days, when he had looked upon him as the greatest, and noblest, and handsomest of men. Would he think so still?

He came, and he was not disappointed. With respect and admiration undiminished, he found that his hero of old times inspired him with a confidence which at once drew the two men together. The painter's thoughtful kindness contrasted strongly with the elder Tharpe's contempt for his son. The former never seemed to think it was impossible his companion could understand an historical allusion, a line in Shakspeare, or the merits of a picture. He asked no questions, never sought to "draw out" the young man, or plumb the depth of his attainments. He talked naturally of what came to hand, without assuming that it was necessary to explain who Jean Goujon was, or who wrote *Le Cid*; but when asked for information, he gave it in the pleasantest way, and never made Algy feel humiliated at his ignorance. They walked about Paris — the old

Paris, alas! so fast disappearing now — the greater part of the day; they visited the streets, they stood before the very houses associated with great men of the past, with notable deeds and strange vicissitudes.

The painter found it was not difficult to strike sparks of interest and enthusiasm from his young companion. No one but Olivia had ever yet tried; and, left to himself, without contact with something to kindle the fiery property, he was only a dull flint, it is true. Of nights they went to theatres; Molière at the Français, where, by dint of reading his book assiduously, Tharpe understood the greater part of what the periwigged actors in *Tartuffe* and *l'Avare* were saying; or Dumas fils at the Gymnase and Vaudeville, where Thompson's aid was constantly called for, to interpret many allusions to the Parisian *mœurs* of the day. Here and elsewhere Thompson came across many acquaintances, but he consorted with none. He had long abjured general society; his queer, out-of-the-world habits rendered him impatient of its forms and restraints. Men who had not seen him for years recognised him with pleasure and surprise, and he returned their cordial shake of the hand, but he never went near them; and he frequented the haunts of fashionable life (the theatre excepted) as little as might be.

One evening, at the Ambigu, in looking round the house, the face of a man in a private box struck him. Where had he seen it before? It was stamped, he knew, in no common way on his memory. He looked a second time, and now recollected where he had seen that hard but handsome face. On the steps of Exeter Hall, in close converse with Mrs. Elliston, one night some ten months ago. He watched him now again

with curiosity. He was whispering and laughing gaily with a pretty woman — English, or her appearance belied her; and at the back of the box an old man was asleep.

“I should have taken some trouble to learn who that fellow is, had I met him again last April. But now — what are the little actress and all her intrigues to me? Nothing. She has passed out of my life for ever. It is another’s duty now to watch over Olivia,” said the painter to himself, with a sigh, as he lowered his opera-glass.

Let us now turn to Julian Westbrook for a while, that other life in the great city, that formed so complete a contrast to Thompson’s, and which is not unimportant to this history. Most people thought of him at this time as a brilliant, successful man; while his days and nights were spent in a round of ignoble desires, hungering after that which, when eaten, satisfieth not; and while nauseating the bitter taste left by yesterday’s food, growing in no strength to resist the poison of the morrow.

He might have done better. He had more than average capacity; and, though hardened in selfishness, was not devoid of all good feeling. He said to himself that if he had married Olivia, it would have been very different with him; for he had his moments of lassitude, of despondency, and self-disgust. But they were transient, and, like the mist of the morning (at which part of the day he was most prone to such attacks), they left no traces behind them. How much solid value was to be attached to his recollection of Olivia, may be gathered from the fact that for the last three months he had been carrying on a conspicuous

flirtation with a married woman, Lady Harriet Tower. He had followed her to Paris, and he was now living at Meurice's in the floor above them, amusing himself with a pursuit which might have no very decisive results, for the lady was more foolish and imprudent than anything else, but which was an excitement while it lasted, and brought with it a certain amount of notoriety, which Julian liked. Else why should he, at the embassy and other places, decoy Lady Harriet into some conspicuous corner, near which every one *must* pass, and murmur in her ear for a whole evening, what looked like a love declaration, and was little more than a running commentary on the society around them? Whenever a man takes pains to let the world know of his devotion to a married woman, depend on it his vanity is more concerned therein than his heart. In point of fact, Julian hardly pretended to himself that he cared much for the individual in question; but she was pretty and "the fashion." She submitted with far too good a grace to be made the object of Julian's attentions, silly little woman as she was; and her old husband, with perfect confidence in her, had the not uncommon weakness of liking his young wife to be admired.

Some such life this man, who might once have been turned to better things, had now led for years past; without any healthy aim, and with the daily corroding vices begotten of idleness and self-indulgence.

Among their first-fruits was his fatal entanglement with Mrs. Elliston, which had galled and chafed him for so long. It had been a very short-lived passion. Even before she was a widow he had become tired of her, and eagerly availed himself of the plea which her

conduct with other men afforded him, to break any promise, made or implied, that he would marry her. Yet she had spoken truly: such was the tyranny and caprice of the man's passions, such the absence of self-restraint, that when he met her again, after three years, the fancy revived, and he sought to renew the intimacy between them. His proposal was rejected with scorn; and then followed mutual accusations, recriminations, bitterness, and wrath. To do him justice, he was liberal enough in money. His supplies had been much more constant than Mrs. Elliston had admitted in her conversation with Olivia; and had not her extravagance been so great, she need never have been put to straits for her child's support. This child was the sorest, bitterest annoyance in Westbrook's existence. Unprincipled as he was, it could not be without remorse that he thought of that little life, hidden away in shame and neglect, and of what its probable future might be. Yet he never sought the child out, nor strove, by any interest and care of his own, to compensate for its mother's abandonment, enforced as, in a measure, he knew that abandonment to be. It was as the extraction of a thorn from his side, which had kept up a constant irritation (and had none of the purifying character of deeper wounds), when he heard of the child's death. And now, to all outward appearance, and in all human probability, Mrs. Elliston and he had done with each other for life.

His love for Olivia had been different from this, or from any other of the passing fancies of his desultory career; it was as real a thing as any sentiment in such a life could be. It had no sort of moral influence on him; it did not prevent his trying to make Lady Har-

riet Tower fall a victim to his fascinations, nor did it arouse him from his inglorious lethargy to the ambition of rendering himself more worthy of the prize before him. He had even, as we have seen, allowed baser objects to divert him from the pursuit of that prize when difficulties arose in his path; yet nothing ever took its place. In other words, however much he might flirt, Olivia was the only woman whom he ever entertained an idea of marrying.

When the Pomfrets passed through Paris in January and saw Julian there, the name of Olivia never passed their lips. They had not then heard of her for many months, it is true; but in each of the two letters they had received while abroad she had especially enjoined them to give her address to *no one*, and they in part, if not wholly, understood her reasons. When Julian, therefore, asked eagerly for news of Miss Marston, his aunt replied that she had heard nothing of her since June, that she had lost her address, and, in short, plainly showed him that whatever she might know she was not going to tell.

But about two months later, shortly after Olivia's removal to Eaton-place, Henry Pomfret had occasion to write to his cousin touching a bracelet he had ordered for his *fiancée* in Paris. At the end of this letter, in naming his mother and sisters, he casually mentioned that Miss Marston was now on a visit to them. Westbrook cursed his fate that he was not in London — she might be already gone, and he have missed his golden opportunity! He thought some uncivil things, I am afraid, of Lady Harriet; and at once sent for the paper of the tidal trains. He told his servant to pack his things, as he should be off that afternoon; and then,

after dressing himself with all his usual care, he went down to Lady Harriet's *salon*.

She and the general had just done breakfast: the general was reading *Galignani* aloud.

"Such a bore!" murmured Julian, with a sigh, when the customary greetings were over; and he sat down, partly turning his back to the general, and looking straight into the lady's eyes. "Such a bore! I've got to return to England on business, and this very day, too — it admits of no delay. Isn't it a nuisance?"

"I am very sorry," said Lady Harriet, in the same tone, and she looked down, and began fiddling at her *breloques*.

"I hope you feel for me — I'm in despair, you know; but you'll be over before long yourself, won't you?"

"I — I don't know," replied the lady. "You promised to go with us to Madame Walewska's to-night. I think it's very shabby of you to throw me over."

"What can I do? Business, you see, which can't possibly be delayed." (The general here left the room.) "You can't, I think — *I'm afraid* — be as much grieved as I am. But I hope you will miss me just a little — a *very* little? Of course, I've no right to ask for more."

"Can't you come back?" said Lady Harriet, after a moment or two.

"Would you send for me?" he asked, in reply; and threw a world of meaning into his tone.

"I suppose we shall be over for the second drawing-room," said the lady, avoiding the question; and

carefully examining a small hole in her pocket-handkerchief.

"Don't be later, pray; London will seem so dreary without you."

"Oh! you will find plenty of consolation there, no doubt," and Lady Harriet gave her pretty head just the least toss. "Monsieur de Navrailles will, I am sure ——"

"Don't name that man — that conceited ape, I beseech you! it is like shaking a red rag before a bull — I can't stand it. Promise me that you won't give him a seat in your box."

Here the general returned, and a waiter announced at the same moment that an emissary of Monsieur Worth's — that modern tyrant of fashion — was waiting to see Lady Harriet.

Before these witnesses the leave-taking could not, necessarily, be very sentimental. It saved Westbrook a great deal of trouble, no doubt. But, Parthian-like, he aimed one arrow, as he squeezed her hand and murmured, —

"Don't forget your favourite air, which I have played to you so often — 'Non ti scordar di me.'"

The lady coloured. Neither the general, nor the waiter, who was clearing away breakfast, understood Italian. And so they parted.

CHAPTER IX.

Travelling Companions.

THOMPSON and his young friend left Paris in the beginning of March, and the greater part of the month they were loitering along the Corniche, between Nice and Leghorn. It was a revelation of beauty to the younger man, such as his imagination had never pictured. Beauty, less of form, perhaps, than of colour; though the outlines of that coast, now sharp and rugged, now pliant and undulating, are full of unexpectedness and variety. From the blue of heaven above, to the yet more wondrous blue of white-fringed sea below; from the grey and silver green of sober olives, twisted with the wear and wind of winters into a thousand fantastic shapes, to the vivid emerald of moss beneath, chequered with the shade of interlacing branches; from the golden rain of sunlight, over rock and tower, glorifying even the very pebbles by the road-side into gems, to the early wealth of blossom — violet, anemone, and flax, — what is there we northerners can dream of comparable with the colour of early spring upon that coast?

Nature, while denying Tharpe many more showy and attractive gifts, had given him a keen eye and a very genuine appreciation for her beauties. He felt, after leaving Paris and getting here, that he never should care for art, or history, or science, as he did for those cloud-shadows, lowering their purple veils over the summits of the rocky mountain; those stains of porphyry and beryl in the azure sea below. His spirits

rose — it was natural they should at his age; life no longer seemed to him the hopeless dismal thing it did, six weeks before, in Portman-square. Everything was a delight to him; the slender plume-crowned palms, with their hint of Eastern lands; the quaint sea-girt towns and villages, clustering up steep rocks, and holding on together, for very life, with arch, and band, and buttress; nay, even the red and yellow sails of fishing-boats, and many-tinted umbrellas of the peasants upon market days — he delighted in them all, and made clumsy attempts to sketch them, moved thereto by his friend's artistic industry.

This was the painter's reward. His own inward heart remained as sunless as ever; but the sight of that fresh honest nature, reviving and expanding under the influence of new scenes, and the absence of restraint, brought with it a satisfaction unknown to Thompson since he had left England. He had become really fond of Algernon, but had hitherto avoided anything like personal confidence from him. He dreaded hearing complaints of old Tharpe, which he knew to be well founded, but which he could meet with no serviceable advice (he need not have been afraid; the son was too loyal to his father for this); and he was not more inclined to hear all the details of the young man's unpropitious love, though he was heartily sorry for him.

At last, however, one day at San Remo — it was a Sunday, and they were sitting in the little garden of the hotel, after attending the English service there — Algernon was fired, I scarcely know how, to talk of Olivia, and to tell the whole story of his love for her and of its hopeless result.

When he first mentioned her name, the painter gave an involuntary exclamation and changed colour. Seeing that the young man remarked it, he would not descend to any subterfuge to conceal his emotion, but told him how he had been living for months under one roof with Olivia, and how her father's illness and death had drawn them yet closer together. He said but few words; yet enough to show how real was his interest in all that concerned Miss Marston. After that, Tharpe felt he could talk more unreservedly about her. How deeply stirred his listener was, he did not know till long afterwards; but he found he had secured one who lent to every little detail of that three months' acquaintance, of Olivia's influence for good over him, of their conversations, of that parting scene between them, an unwearied attention.

Thompson was puzzled. When first the truth flashed upon him, that the object of this poor honest boy's hopeless adoration was Olivia, he had but one feeling: that of sincere pity. The idea that there should ever have been a question of marriage between them could not be seriously entertained. Yet it presently became evident that such an idea had not only been sanctioned, but warmly encouraged, by Miss Pringle. Was it possible, he asked himself with a thrill of hope, that *this* was the aspirant of whose success with her niece the old lady had so confidently spoken? There were circumstances which seemed to favour this supposition: the beginning of the boy's worship must have been about the date of Thompson's interview with Miss Pringle. Olivia's evident kindness to Algernon might have led the sanguine match-making aunt to build up a structure of false hopes. But the belief implanted in

Thompson, that the man for whom Olivia had confessed her preference, whom she believed to have proved himself unworthy, and who had now come forward, no doubt, to proclaim his love, this belief was not to be so quickly eradicated. It was one of those convictions for which there seems little or no ground, when it comes to be viewed, hereafter, by the calm light of reason; but we have accepted it without discussion; we have got accustomed to it; we cannot easily part with it. And the name of Pomfret which Algernon mentioned, when he said that Olivia had now left her aunt's house, seemed to throw a flood of light upon the question, while it strengthened the above-named conviction in Thompson's mind.

He knew something of the family, from circumstances which will be learnt hereafter: he had, moreover, often heard Olivia speak of them; he knew they had been intimate in the old Fordingham days; and now a passage in Mr. Harrington's letter flashed upon his recollection — the rumour that Henry Pomfret was going to be married, — "I have not yet been able to learn to whom" — followed by the statement that he was a fine fellow, and a universal favourite with women. The whole thing seemed plain enough now. The theory that this Pomfret was, and always had been, the man of Olivia's choice, reconciled and accounted for everything. So long as he was a younger son, he had shrunk from offering her his hand; now, as an only one, he had come forward, and all had been explained. Algernon Tharpe had been used as a cat's-paw by the old lady; she had encouraged him warmly for his own merits, at first, until she learnt that there was the possibility of a far greater *parti* for her niece; and then

she still encouraged him, no doubt, by way of edging on Pomfret to propose. The fact of Olivia's having gone to take up her temporary residence with the family seemed conclusive.

But he kept all these thoughts to himself. As it was clear that Tharpe neither knew nor guessed anything of the matter, Thompson dropped no hint that might suggest it.

After this, in their walks, Olivia's name was often introduced by the younger man into their conversation; and the elder never discouraged it. He generally walked on in silence; answering if required, and letting fall a pithy word now and then.

They were sitting one afternoon on a fragment of fallen rock by the roadside, some miles beyond Oneglia. They had had a long walk, and were only now half-way to their night's halting-place, whither they had sent on their portmanteaux before them. Each had lit his pipe, and they were enjoying the pleasant drowsy sense of mid-day rest, well earned, under a southern sun, when Algernon, looking up, exclaimed rather abruptly — "I say, I never thought of it before, but I wonder how it was you didn't fall in love with Miss Marston yourself, being so long in the same house with her."

"You forget two things," said the painter, taking out his sketch-book, and turning somewhat away from Algernon towards the landscape: "First of all, my age."

"Oh! you're not so *very* old; and I'm sure any woman — well, I won't say that, because it sounds bosh — but still, now I come to think about it, I wonder you could help it — that's all."

"The second thing you forget is my former history, — my dread of women, and my horror of marriage."

"I beg your pardon, I had forgotten, it is true." Then, after a pause, he added: "But doesn't dread, and horror, and vows, and all that, go down like a shot before love? It seems to me that I should forget all about it."

"You are but two-and-twenty. Age sobers us — strengthens us to resist any mad, hopeless fancies, or should do so. When I was your age, I fell in love," he continued, after a pause, "and a bad business I made of it. Happy is the man who, whether his love be successful or not, worships in his youth the purest, noblest type of womanhood, as you have done, Alger-non! Not only is it a safeguard from baser passions; it raises for ever, in his life, the standard of excellence in woman."

"Yes," replied Tharpe, reflectively, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe; "after her every other woman seems — I don't know what — not fit to hold a candle to her. Why, even the governor, who is so awfully hard on women, couldn't find a fault with her."

"Couldn't he," said Thompson; but in no tone of inquiry.

"You say you've a dread of women," continued the young man; "but I can hardly believe it; at least, it's very different from the governor's feeling. He thinks any man a fool who falls in love. *You* say you think a fellow lucky. I can't believe, therefore, that you've so little faith in the sex."

"No wonder that you cannot believe it, my dear boy. It would be unnatural at your age, and with your experience, that you should be able to enter into

this complex feeling. My faith in women was unbounded at your age. In certain women — in women whom I have studied — it is so still. But I shrink from the general run of pretty faces, sweet voices, and winning ways. I mistrust them; having eaten my own bitter apple from the tree of knowledge, in that line. I would give all I possess to be without that knowledge — to be once more as you are now, my boy, unsuspecting of worldliness and heartlessness, if not of worse. But it can't be. Trees won't grow downwards. That is why I say the man is happy whose first experiment in love raises his reverence for women."

Algernon said nothing. He was thinking of all he had heard of the painter's marriage; of the terrible retribution which had followed that act of early folly. Admiring his friend as he did — that fine man, so noble, so generous, so richly endowed by nature, whom, as long as Algernon could remember, he had heard spoken of as a sort of phoenix, and had regarded as such — that there should be no future, no second spring, for him, with the probabilities of yet a long life before him, seemed to Algernon impossible.

"Surely," he said, at last, "you will marry again some day? if it's only for the sake of—"

"My dear boy," said Thompson, laughing: it was rather a forced laugh, but he wished to divert the conversation from this personal ground — "did I ever tell you of a friend of mine who married four wives? They treated him one worse than the other successively, yet as each died he looked out for another, with a hope, which was really pathetic, that he would be better treated next time. He never was. Yet, I think, if he hadn't died he would have tried a fifth. I'm not of

such a sanguine temperament. Come, we must be starting, or we shall never get to Alassio to-night."

I give this fragment of conversation as a sample out of many similar ones. The impression left on Tharpe's mind was always the same: that his friend had never looked on any woman, with the thought of marriage, since he became a widower.

At Rome, where they arrived just before Holy Week, the painter fell ill of Roman fever. And now if anything had been wanting to cement this friendship, Tharpe's devoted care of Thompson must have done so. He did not take off his clothes for many nights, and in tender watchfulness no woman could have surpassed him. I will not assert that he was a noiseless, deft-handed nurse: the way in which he bounced and blundered about the room would have irritated very sensitive nerves. But Thompson's, fortunately, were not sensitive; and I think he preferred Algernon, with all his awkward ways, to most skilful nurses. There was something very touching to the sick man, bruised as he was in spirit, and into whose life so little love had fallen, in this honest, faithful boy's attachment. How many of those fellows who had snubbed Algernon at school, at college, in society, who called him a lout, and made merry over his clumsiness — how many of them would have given up all the excitement of the Holy Week, the music and the pomp, the novelty, and curiosity, and crush culminating in the illuminations and fireworks of Easter Monday to sit by a friend's bedside, in a hot room, day after day?

As soon as Thompson could be moved they travelled by easy stages to Naples, where the pure sea air did its work of restoration more rapidly than any

quantity of quinine in the balmy, deathly atmosphere of the Campagna. Here and in the neighbourhood, among the orange-groves of Sorrento, under the sun-burnt convent walls of Amalfi, along the ups and downs, the gardens and pretty vine-clad ways of Ischia, they wandered for many weeks. They got no letters; they expected none; and they were in no hurry, either of them, to return home. Tharpe's resolution to set himself to work of some kind never wavered, as his father would find; but there was time enough for this, and the rare delight of such a journey in such companionship he might never have again. As to Thompson, it is easy to understand why he felt no great inclination to return to England.

But, taking up the *Times* one day at the club at Naples, he read something which suddenly changed all his plans. He did not point out the paragraph to Tharpe; but he told his companion that evening that he must go to England by the next steamer. It was then the beginning of June.

CHAPTER X.

In Eaton-place.

I DO not think Mrs. Pomfret would have urged Olivia so strongly to leave her aunt, and to come and reside, for a while, under the Pomfret roof, if the only son and heir of that house had not been engaged to be married.

In the first place, twenty months abroad had materially enlarged the good mother's views of life. Twenty years' residence at Caverton Park had only

kept her, by a constant struggle, just above the surface of commercial gentility with which the neighbourhood of Fordingham was swamped. But at Nice, at Homburg, and at Baden, she learnt that with a large fortune, with balls, and dinners, and pic-nics sown broadcast, it is not difficult to climb up into good society, if not the best those places afford. One introduction led to another. Each of the girls had two or three offers from foreign counts (one in a railway carriage, which was rather embarrassing, as they had to travel together nearly a hundred miles after Mary had refused him). Finally, after Lionel's death, which was a heavy blow to the poor mother, and which cut short all the girls' Nice gaieties, came handsome Henry, and carried all before him. It was small wonder that such a *beau sabreur*, and heir to twenty thousand a year, should very easily win pretty Lady Helena Donnel, the portionless daughter of a dowager-countess, who was always out at elbows. Am I not justified in saying that Mrs. Pomfret's views of life were enlarged?

Nor was this all. Kind as she had always been, and still showed herself, to Olivia, it is not to be supposed that she could be quite unmoved by the change in the girl's worldly position. She had left her, living a sort of charmed life, like the princess in a fairy tale, surrounded by all that was luxurious and refined, in that secluded home, from which most strangers had been shut out. Miss Marston's distinction of manner and appearance had of course their own due weight; and the *mise-en-scène* also counted for a good deal. And now, Mrs. Pomfret had returned to find her poor and friendless, obliged to endure the society of whomsoever her aunt chose, and leading a miserable life, from which

she was only too thankful to escape. It is not in the stuff out of which such persons as Mrs. Pomfret are made to resist entirely the influence of outward circumstances. She had still the highest admiration — really an affectionate regard for Olivia; she was most anxious to do all she could for her; nay, if Lionel had been still alive it is certain that she would still have desired the match, by reason of her faith in Olivia's beneficial influence. But Henry was different. He was a model young man to begin with, superior to beneficial influence; and his personal merits were so patent to the world, that there was no marriage he might not be justified in expecting to make. As we have seen, he did justify these expectations (if he ever had them); and Olivia came to Eaton-place.

It was one of those houses we all know so well — blameless and uninteresting to the last degree. You would have given anything had there been some flagrant object of bad taste — say, a saffron paper with crimson border, upon which you could launch forth, and lay violent hands. It was only tame and colourless, and like every other house that seems to hang up the fog upon its walls, and drape it over the windows.

Olivia's room was over the back drawing-room. Here she lived a good deal, as she still shunned general society, and there were constant visitors, few of whom she cared to see. The Pomfrets went out most evenings, and when at home they had generally one or two people to dinner. When the party was larger Olivia always begged off, and remained up-stairs.

Olivia and Mary became great friends. Kate was well enough in her way, but common-place, a little thick, like her figure. Time, and the world too, be-

tween them, had not improved her; they had robbed her of the fresh bloom of youth, without substituting mellowness. It is only the finest natures, I think, like good wine, that improve with keeping. But Mary was just one of those creatures whom it was impossible not to love. Scarcely to be called very pretty, but with one of those sweet sensitive faces, that are better to look at, in the long run, than much positive beauty; far from clever, quite unremarkable in every way, she was a universal favourite with men and women. Every servant in the house would have gone barefoot for her.

Though there were few of the subjects near her heart upon which she could converse with Mary, Olivia found great pleasure in the young girl's companionship. She felt herself grown so prematurely old in the last few months; she, whose spirit, before that time, had always been so buoyant, was now so depressed, that the contact with this fresh young nature, unspoiled, and full of enjoyment in all around her, was as the opening of a window that lets the morning light into a darkened room.

Rupert was a favourite subject between them. Often in her solitary hours, during the past year, Olivia had indulged the fancy of a possible marriage between her brother and the little girl whom he had named more than once in his letters. When he returned home, after two years' seclusion from society, and saw Mary, would not the impression that little girl had made be renewed with far more strength? She herself retained a lively recollection of him there was no doubt; a recollection which all her foreign counts and gay London partners had not effaced. As to what Mrs. Pomfret might say, whether she would ever hear of poor, struggling, hard-

working Rupert for a son-in-law, now that she and her family had risen so much in the scale of society, Olivia put that thought aside whenever it crossed her mind. If the two really loved each other, every obstacle, she felt convinced, would give way before that love. So she read aloud bits of his letters, and spoke to Mary of all his manly struggles with adversity, of his strength of character, and of her hope that he might find a wife worthy of him. Olivia now looked eagerly for his return, weekly — almost daily; for he might come, like a thief in the night. He had written his last letter from San Francisco. If he arrived in New York in time to catch the mail steamer, and had no detention in that city, he might appear without her hearing from him again. Against her aunt poor Olivia's bitterness of feeling had passed away with the irritation which the presence of that moral blister had produced. It is astonishing the softening effect of distance. Of course it was impossible that she should forgive, altogether, the old lady's absurd and unwarrantable stratagems in Olivia's behalf; but what, she asked herself, had that whole existence been? with its round of petty plots, and vanities and scandals; its deep-laid tea-and-coffee schemes, and small whist triumphs? Was it not all of a piece? Can figs grow on thistles? According to her view of life, its aims and its enjoyments, Miss Pringle had done her very best for her niece.

Not the less resolutely, however, did she determine that she would never be induced to live again under her aunt's roof. For the present she was safe enough; since on Rupert's return, they would, of course, take a small lodging together. When he married — for she had settled in her mind that he would marry very soon

— she would seek a living for herself, somehow: she seemed to care very little what it was, only nothing should persuade her to return to her aunt. She called on the old lady once or twice a week; she sat patiently for whole hours listening to frivolous twaddle and abuse of her servants; and almost the only pleasure she ever got out of these visits was when she heard that Algernon Tharpe was gone abroad for a while to join some friend in Italy. She asked her aunt's forgiveness, if she had ever been wanting in respect or consideration for her while under her roof; and she had to listen to a great deal of abuse of the Pomfrets, whom Miss Pringle now pronounced to be vulgar, stuck-up people. The truth is, Mrs. Pomfret never invited Miss Pringle; and surely people *have* a right to bid or not to bid their acquaintance to their houses as they see fit? Apparently not, in London: from the indignation with which any free exercise of inclination in this respect is greeted.

She never spoke of these things to any one. But there was another and a far deeper trouble than any I have named, compared with which, indeed, they were as nothing. The unappeased craving to learn something of Thompson had been growing in all those months. She longed, with the intensest longing, to know where he was; what he was doing; whether he ever thought of her; and as, with the close of each week, the probability of her ever seeing him again appeared to get fainter, a hopeless, desolate feeling crept over her, against which she found it in vain to struggle. It was mostly at night, in the long, dreary sleepless hours, when she heard carriages rattling home from balls, and distant cries of link-boys, and church-clocks calling to each other across London, in the comparative stillness,

that his image haunted her. Sometimes with sad, reproachful eyes; sometimes with the quiet smile of old; always with the strength of a master, and the wisdom and tenderness of a friend.

Of course, the question which she was constantly arguing with herself now was, whether, loving him as she knew she did, she had been justified in refusing him. She had heard his views upon marriage from his own lips, and believing, as she then did, that his offer was but the generous instinct of one who had no other means of affording her protection — was the feeling (with its tinge of womanly pride) which prompted her to reject his hand, right or wrong? Should she, under like circumstances, act again as she then did? She thought not. Remembering certain looks, certain intonations of his, the last time they met, above all, remembering his letter, she was sure not. The doubt, which still made her tremulous, when she recurred to it, had then, on the receipt of that letter, first arisen in her, whether it were possible that this man, whose wife she had refused to be, cared for her, with any stronger, more passionate feeling than friendship and pity. At the time when she was seeing him for hours every day, she never dreamt of this. But afterwards — afterwards, when it was too late — she certainly had, for an instant, some such dream. It might be self-delusion: an idea, built up chiefly out of mere nothings; but the memory of those nothings haunted her. It was worse than useless now, however, to dwell on these: he was gone, and she had no possible means of obtaining any clue to his present movements or his future plans. And yet she thought of him just the same, however useless it might be; and

night after night the cry of her heart arose after that love which she herself had put aside.

The four ladies were in the drawing-room one morning after breakfast. There had been a great concert the night before at Lord Dumberly's. Great, that is to say, as regarded the company; for which reason Mrs. Pomfret was naturally more pleased than if the music had been better and the company less good; for his lordship was generally known only to employ third-rate artists: the best of music, like the best of everything else, costs a great deal; and his lordship was not a man to spend two hundred pounds, where fifty would do as well. Music is music, and a concert a concert, be the performers never so unknown to fame: indeed, is it not a fine thing to draw forth hidden talent? Therefore, Lord Dumberly, while entertaining "the best people" a certain number of times every season, saved his money, and gained a reputation, to boot, as a patron of obscure merit.

"I wish you could have been there, my dear Olivia," said Mrs. Pomfret, as she put down the *Morning Post*, after reading aloud the list of guests, down to the uttermost esquire, at Dumberly House, and feeling a just satisfaction at finding duly recorded, "Mrs. and the Misses Pomfret (two)." "I wish you could have been there; you would have revelled in the sweet music, I'm sure; and it was altogether so very brilliant — quite what the French call a *cashey* of distinction about the whole thing."

"You didn't think the music very good, mamma, did you?" asked Mary, hesitatingly. "It was nothing like Mrs. Samson's the other night. There we had Mario, and —"

"My dear child, don't talk of the two together, *pray*. We are obliged to go to the Samsons, because they're old friends of your father's, and I shouldn't wish them to think that we gave ourselves airs, now; but the idea of comparing the two!"

"One thought of the people, not about the music, last night," said Kate, candidly. "The music certainly was not first-rate. In fact, except that Madame Stellino (and I don't know that one ought to except *her*), there wasn't one good singer."

"Well, my dear, I'm no judge," said her mother, which was indeed true. "You understand music, which I *don't* — but it seemed to me very pretty: and as to that Madame — what do you call her? —'s voice, I don't know when I've heard anything that struck me as much. What you call *resonant*, rolls round the room in a surprising way. I can assure you I heard every one saying so round me, and saying what an uncommonly pretty woman she was, too — quite a discovery of Lord Dumberly's."

"He heard her somewhere in the provinces," said Kate. "She has a beautiful voice, certainly; but Mr. Devonport, the great musical authority, says she doesn't know how to sing — and, of course, he's right."

"I think it must be quite a misfortune to be as critical as that," said her sister, quietly. "It must deprive one of so much pleasure. She sings with a great deal of expression, don't you think so, Kate? and it was pretty to watch her — she got so excited. I saw her hands quite trembling when she sang 'Robert, toi que j'aime.'"

What a number of recollections the mere name of the song awoke in Olivia! How well she remembered

the first time she heard Julian Westbrook play it, his annoyance (then so incomprehensible to her) when Mrs. Elliston's name was mentioned, and afterwards how often she had heard the passion-stirred voice, imploring for "Grâce!" from the room overhead!

She had been paying but a very divided attention to this concert-talk. She listened now with more interest.

"Her looks will get her on, no doubt," said Kate, authoritatively. "The Duchess of Battersea, I heard, said she should have her at her concert, because her son admired her — a very bad reason, I must say; but all the men made a great fuss with her last night — I saw that. I can't think where I have seen the woman before, but I certainly *have* seen her, and heard her too, a long time ago."

"And so the Duchess of Battersea is going to have her? *In-deed!*" said Mrs. Pomfret. "Well, I was thinking myself, that if we have some music at my party next Thursday, I should like to have her. Something new, and I suppose not very dear? Your papa wouldn't like anything very dear. We must really see about it, Kate."

To them enters Henry, in the smoking costume of the period, having just arisen from breakfast and from bed.

"Good morning, mother. How d'ye do, Miss Marston? Well, Mary, you look as fresh as paint after all your raking — better than you do, Kate. Beastly weather, this, ain't it? I was going to take Helena a ride in the park, but it's hopeless. By-the-by, mother, the twentieth of next month is the day I'm to be turned off. Lady Caerlavrock told me she'd fixed on it last

night. Lord Dumberly's to lend us the Beeches for the honeymoon."

Mrs. Pomfret found cause for annoyance, but also for gratification, in her son's speech.

"I must say I think Lady Caerlavrock *might* have named about the day to *me* — however, it's no matter; and as to Lord Dumberly's offer, nothing can be nicer than your going down to the Beeches — it's quite an ideal sort of thing."

"I don't know about the ideality," laughed Henry, taking up a cup and ball from the table, and beginning to play with it. "The reality, I believe, is an uncommonly damp, gloomy cottage — so Helena says. However, it's a convenient distance from London, and in May everything in the country looks jolly; and as her uncle has offered it, I suppose it's better to accept it. How did you like his concert, girls? I thought it — no, I won't say what I thought it, as I'm so soon to be a member of the family. That was a pretty woman who sang, wasn't she?"

"You had no business to have eyes for any one but Helena," laughed Kate.

"And Helena *did* look so lovely," cried Mary; "I wish you could have seen her, Olivia."

"I always admire her very much."

"It is reciprocal," said Henry, evidently gratified, chiefly at her words, no doubt, but perhaps partly also from having just succeeded in catching the ball on the point. "She is coming here this very day to ask whether you'll be one of her bridesmaids, Miss Marston, and to talk over the dresses with you, Kate. By-the-by, is the governor at home?"

"Oh, he has been gone ages," said his mother.

"Indeed, I think he is gone down to Milton-Eyre to-day to see after the funiture. We shall go down there altogether, I believe, in June. I hope, Henry, that Lady Caerlavrock is *more* than satisfied with the very liberal manner in which your father has behaved? (Don't get up, Olivia, I make no stranger of you; sit down, my dear.) She has not said anything to *me* about it, but I must say *such* settlements are what few —"

"All right, my dear mother; Lady Caerlavrock knows that. She is quite satisfied. Don't let us say more about it. I'm sick of talking of settlements; I've heard of nothing else for the last six weeks."

"Yes, because Lady Caerlavrock wouldn't hear of the marriage being announced till she knew what they were to be. Not that I *blame* her. Of course, it's a mother's duty to look after her child's interests; but I think she *might* acknowledge the very handsome manner —"

"She *does* acknowledge it, my dear mother, only I have entreated her, and everybody else, to leave off talking of three and a half per cents. and consols and securities. If you will only believe it, Lord Dumberly, and all the rest of the family, *are* duly impressed with the governor's liberality. You'll see that, in consequence, there'll be a scramble presently among all the younger brothers of all the great houses connected with the Caerlavrocks for Kate and Mary."

It was very well for Henry to laugh, and Mary to echo him; but Kate did not like that sort of joke. Presently Henry, turning to Olivia, asked if she had heard from Rupert, and when she expected him.

"Mr. Claxton knows no more than I, whether he

will be here by the next mail or not. He may walk in any morning."

"I shall be so glad to see him again. Such a good fellow! If he is here in time, I shall ask him to be my best man."

Olivia smiled, but said nothing: she was leaving the room. When the door was shut, Mrs. Pomfret looked up, and cleared her throat slightly.

"My dear Henry, you know how fond I am of Olivia, and indeed, if your poor dear brother had lived — but I won't go back to that. And, as to Mr. Marston himself, I have a great — hum — *regard* for him. I think him a most *worthy* young man, and the way in which he has struggled through all their troubles is most creditable. I'm sure, *most* creditable. But as to being your *best man*, my dear, you know, without my telling you, that there are *social distinctions*, and so on; and I think you might find some one more fitted to fill so conspicuous a position. I think Lady Caerlavrock and the family might feel — well, I scarcely know how to express it — but might prefer seeing you supported by some one in their own set — do you see what I mean?"

Mary's cheek crimsoned, and her lip trembled to speak, but she restrained herself, and turned to the window.

Henry caught his ball three times running on the point, before he replied:

"Helena's people are not such fools as you take them to be, my dear mother. They would have every right to think me a snob, if I got some young swell whom I scarcely know, to be my bottle-holder. From having been so long on foreign service, there isn't a

fellow I know well in London; but Marston and I, during the time we were in Jamaica together, were very thick; and if *I'm* good enough for the Caerlavrock lot, I'm sure *he* is."

CHAPTER XI.

An Evening Party.

THE Caerlavrock and Dumberly clans were to be gathered together, at the sounding of Mrs. Pomfret's clarion, on the Thursday evening to which she had referred. It was to begin with a great banquet, after which Mrs. Pomfret was "to receive" a large, but chosen circle, composed of all her new acquaintances, and none of her old friends. Nor had these any right to complain; the Yellowlys, and Miss Turkaine, and the Bagshots, and all that set, had been duly fed; and would have been quite "out of their element on this occasion," as Mrs. Pomfret expressed it, when Mary pleaded for some old playmate of hers, whose lines had not fallen in fashionable places.

Olivia was the only exception to this; and her, Mrs. Pomfret begged as a favour to leave her solitude up-stairs and be present. For Lady Caerlavrock had talked so much of her beauty when she saw her one morning, and Lady Helena had conceived such a girlish enthusiasm about her, and Lord Dumberly himself had asked with such curiosity to see this Miss Marston, and had even invited her (through Mrs. Pomfret) to his concert, that there was every reason for having Olivia to add an *éclat* to the evening. People who meet night after night are grateful for a new face

to discuss; it is very small talk, perhaps, but it is universal; from the highest to the lowest, from the profound politician to the shallowest fool, it is the one subject upon which all have an opinion, and none are afraid to give it.

The banquet was not nearly such a solemn and awful business as Olivia had expected from Mrs. Pomfret's condition beforehand. They were all naturally well-bred people; at least, they appeared so on this occasion. Olivia detected now and then a smile, which got no further than the eyes, upon one or two faces when poor Mrs. Pomfret gave vent to some of her inflated common-places, and strove to suit her company by being very grand; but old Pomfret himself was so entirely without pretension, so simple and kindly, that it was impossible that any one, even in his sleeve, could laugh at *him*. Lord Dumberly had his little jests with Kate and Mary across the table (the wit would not bear transporting any further, but by the girls' mirth you would have supposed it was Sydney Smith himself); in short, all these great people were at their ease, and laughed and talked pleasantly, not at all as if they were assisting at an appalling function. It was this being at their ease which struck Olivia as the chief point of difference between the guests round Mr. Pomfret's board to-day, and most of those whom she remembered in the old Fordingham days. The women had not that intense consciousness of wearing smart gowns which paralyses all power of being pleasant; and the men, who were probably not a whit cleverer than the Yellowly and Bagshot race, had a light-in-hand way of discussing every topic under the sun, which contrasted pleasantly with the ponderous

manner in which, at those Fordingham dinners, a subject used to be boarded, and never abandoned, till it was left a wreck. Julian's plastic powers of conversation, even his free-and-easy style in general society, which chafed Rupert so much, had shone agreeably in Olivia's eyes formerly beside the starched dulness of the other men; and now, by an odd accident, she found herself seated next to a young clerk in the Foreign Office, whose general tone reminded her not a little of Westbrook. He observed, after dinner, to his cousin, Lord Dumberly's second son, before they joined the ladies, that the girl in black — the new beauty — was unlike any woman he had ever met; twice during dinner, when he had spoken to her, she had not heard him. There was a weariness, too, about her expression, every now and then, very strange in a girl of two or three and twenty, who had never been out in London before. Poor Olivia! Her thoughts, at those moments, were far distant, and with a very different sort of person; moved, perhaps, by the force of some half-unconscious comparison between the pleasure to be derived from the fashionable youth's conversation, and that of a man beside whom she had never felt one single moment's weariness. Yet the attaché had the good taste not to talk of people and entertainments about which Olivia knew nothing: he spoke glibly of Italy and Spain, of the opera, and the last new novel, much as Westbrook might have done; and she remembered with astonishment how pleasant she had once thought *him*. But she did not know that had her neighbour been twice as agreeable, she would not have found him so; for her heart and mind were too heavy with other matters.

The ladies had scarcely reached the drawing-room, when some of those who were probably bound to two or three balls further on in the evening began to arrive. Olivia got into a corner of the back drawing-room behind the grand piano, the tail of which was turned out into the room in honour of the musical entertainment which Mrs. Pomfret had provided. From this post Olivia could see every one who entered, and nearly all that went on in the two rooms, without being herself conspicuous; Lady Helena presently joined her.

The plot thickened: then arrived a sprinkling of men. Mrs. Pomfret, the more onerous duties of the banquet being over, became lighter-hearted, and smiled with less of anxiety and of crushing importance as she greeted her guests. Then came in a bearded beauty—such a beauty that, Lady Helena said, women were supposed to have looked at him, and died straightway. This was the famous baritone, Degl' Occhi, now a little dyed and generally the worse for wear, and, consequently, less dangerous to introduce into the bosom of a family than he was some fifteen years back, when he used to sigh and say, “È una disgrazia di esser così bello.” Now he could with more safety be permitted to teach young ladies, and to sing at evening parties; and he was to sing to-night with Madame Stellino, who had not yet come, but “made herself to be desired,” as the Italians expressively phrase it.

The men now sauntered up from the dining-room. Some of them stuck on the landing or in the doorway, after the manner of Englishmen; but Lord Dumberly, as befitted his position, came handsomely to the front, with the wig and double eye-glass so familiar about

town, and stood by Mrs. Pomfret while she received; Mr. Pomfret sneaking behind on the stairs, I am grieved to say, with some of the recusants. Henry, however, was of course not among them; he quickly found out his Helena's corner, and persuaded her to give him a small bit of her ottoman, whereby the beautiful sweep of her dress was destroyed, and Olivia was deprived of her bright, amusing little companion, who now became engrossed by her other neighbour.

Presently there was a little stir at the door; the crowd round it was too great for Olivia to see who entered, but a footman laid a roll of music on the piano, and Lord Dumberly's voice was heard crying out, "Ah! we've been looking anxiously for you." Then Olivia knew it must be Madame Stellino. The crowd parted to enable the singer to make her way to the piano, and Olivia saw before her Clara Elliston.

She was, if possible, prettier than a year ago: but before her piercing eyes had travelled to the obscure corner behind the piano — for she was still talking to Lord Dumberly, who had followed her — Olivia had time to notice an important change in the singer's general appearance and manner. She was neatly but inexpensively dressed in half-mourning, without ornaments of any kind, and her demeanour was that of the most subdued, modest, and shrinking widow whom stern necessity ever drove to sing before an enthusiastic public. She acted the part to such perfection, that had Olivia known her less well she would have been deceived. Her eyes shyly drooped at his lordship's flowery compliments, her deprecating smile, her sweet fluttering little answers, and half-sad, half-frightened glances round her every now and then — here was a

contrast to the childish audacity, garrulity, and unconcealed vanity of the Clara whom Olivia had known! What, together with her change of name, did it all mean? Olivia could scarcely help smiling at the little comedy before her; but it was a smile that had no pleasure in it.

Suddenly Clara's eye caught hers.

She coloured up to the roots of her hair, and sprang forward, leaving Lord Dumberly standing, a good deal surprised, and not altogether pleased, at being left thus, after his marked condescension.

"My dear, *dear* Olivia! How delighted I am to see you once more! What an age it is since we parted! And to meet with a real, *true* friend in the midst of the cold and heartless throng, who know nothing of all one's troubles, and only care for the amusement one can give them — oh! what a real joy it is!"

She seized both her hands; and had she not been in society, I think the ready tears would have come.

Lady Helena looked up in astonishment, and so did Henry.

All the response which Olivia could persuade herself to make to this effusion was:

"Thank you, Clara, I am as much surprised as you are; not the least expecting, when I heard of Madame Stellino, to see *you*."

"It never occurred to you, then, that it was but a transposition of the letters of my name? I found that as long as I stuck to the English arrangement of those letters, I should never get on. Oh! I've got so much to tell you, dear. You know that poor Aunt Crosbie is gone?"

"No, indeed I did not. I am very sorry, Clara. How do you get on alone? I hope you have some one ——"

"Ah! I know what you mean. No, I have no one to take care of me; but then, you know, I am so much changed, dear! and I have given up the stage entirely."

"I'm very glad to hear it, but how came that about? You were so devoted to it a year ago."

"It was Aunt Crosbie's dying request, to begin with, that unless I married again (which it is very unlikely that I shall ever do)" — here she looked down, and sighed — "I should never sing again on the stage. It was a great deprivation to me, but I suppose it *was* best. People *will* talk so. And I find now I shall make much more by concerts and lessons, than I did by opera singing at small theatres. Since Lord Dumberly's party, I have had more engagements offered me than I can accept."

"He met you in the country, I think? You have not been long in London?"

"Only two or three weeks. I was singing at Bath, when Lord Dumberly heard me, and told me to come to London, and that he could get me engagements, he thought. And two or three families promised me lessons, and so I came. Before that, I had been staying about in country-houses, teaching for a fortnight or three weeks at a time in different families, ever since Aunt Crosbie's death, last December. Oh! I am very much changed, dear! I am become such a sober, sedate person, you wouldn't know me."

Olivia thought she did. Degl' Occhi came up, and touching Clara on the arm with a roll of music, told

her they were waiting for her to begin. She squeezed Olivia's hand, took the music from him, and turned to the piano.

It was one of those long boisterous duets, which may be indicative of anything under the sun, except love and tranquillity; and it was very energetically sung. The first movement was like a succession of loud thunder claps, as the antagonistic forces rolled up, and met each other with repeated shocks; the second movement resembled the rush and scurry of the pitiless storm that follows. It was not the sort of music that Olivia cared for; and it seemed to her that Clara's voice had lost something of its roundness; but then a whole year's singing, at full stretch, must impair the most beautiful organ, and Clara had not yet learnt the cunning mastery of resources which enables the artist to spare himself: she was always at full stretch. In other respects, her singing was much improved; and intense as ever was her passionate earnestness, infusing a vitality even into this trashy music. The applause was enthusiastic, led by Lord Dumberly, and followed up by young and old alike.

"Quite carries one away!"

"There's something in her high notes —!"

"And then, so charming to watch her! She is so pretty, and so modest, and sweet-looking! Nothing flaunty or bold, like many of those sort of people."

"It's my opinion that Patti can't hold a candle to her." This came from a young life-guardsman, who in virtue of a stall at Covent Garden twice a week considered himself an authority. A languid lady near him looked up from her seat in the doorway, and murmured —

“Quite the music of the spheres, don’t you think?”

Whether the life-guardsman committed himself to an opinion on this point, I am not sure; but one thing was clear, that the verdict of the room upon the new singer was unanimous. After that, Degl’ Occhi might roar out “Il Balen,” with all the conventional spasmodic expression proper to the villain of an opera, but hardly any one listened to him. They had looked upon his stony beauty, and listened to his brassy voice for many seasons, now; and the voice was no longer “the voice of the charmer.” Poor fellow: this fair little woman, who was new, and whose face was as lovely as her voice, occupied all eyes and all tongues. She sat very quietly by the piano, looking up into the baritone’s face, while he sang, apparently absorbed, and unconscious that she was the subject of general enthusiasm. A little more elation would have better pleased Olivia. She could not believe in either the diffidence, or the indifference. It all seemed to her overdone; but then, she acknowledged that she was prejudiced. After all, why should there not be that genuine change in Clara, which Olivia had tried so often to effect? Ought she not to rejoice in the subdued demeanour which seemed to imply that Madame Stellino was, in fact, quite another person to Mrs. Elliston? Olivia felt that perhaps she was uncharitable: but her convictions as to Clara were not easily to be shaken.

Madame Stellino was now to sing a solo. She turned over the roll of music in her hand, still sitting, and leaning across to the accompanist at the piano, to discuss which of two songs she should choose. Half the eyes in the room, Olivia’s included, were fixed on

her; and her own never betrayed that she knew it by so much as a furtive glance round.

Suddenly — her eyes were still upon the music — she started, and turned pale. She bent her head still lower, so that her face was almost hidden, but Olivia saw that the roll in her hand shook.

"I am afraid she is ill," said Lady Helena to Olivia.

Olivia did not reply. Clara had raised her head, and, save that her fingers twitched nervously at the music, all trace of emotion was gone. Some one was talking and laughing rather above the rest of the voices in the doorway between the two rooms. Almost unconsciously, Olivia looked up; and she needed not then to be told what had moved Clara.

There, talking to Lord Dumberly, stood Julian Westbrook.

Clara never once turned her eyes in that direction. The voice which smote upon her singularly sharp ears was enough. No doubt she had long foreseen the probability of such meeting, and was, in a measure, prepared. But it needed, nevertheless, some courage when it came with a hundred eyes upon her. Olivia's compassion was once more roused, heightened, I think, by indignation against the man towards whom, when they last met, she had felt so very differently. Her own cheek went red and white, she knew, as she looked at him. The handsome face had lost all attraction for her. How could she ever have liked it? she asked herself, almost with disgust.

He did not see her yet, and she had time to think in what way she should meet him. To a consummate actress, like Clara, it might be easy enough, but not to

Olivia. How could she endure any return to the tone of intimacy which had existed two years ago? And if she received him as her own feelings prompted, how was she, whose lips were sealed, to justify this change to Mrs. Pomfret? In this house, above all, the position was a difficult one.

The prelude to Clara's song was now being played, and she rose, fixing her eyes steadily, as she did so, upon the folding-doors opposite. They never quivered, nor turned aside. In excitement, the pupils always contracted, and they burnt now, like specks of green fire, wonderful in radiance and intensity. Against the sill of that doorway Westbrook leant, examining her with a cool, scrutinising curiosity, much as he would have done by any other new star who had sprung up. To Olivia, who alone of all present knew the link that bound those two, it was a strange sight to watch.

The song was from the *Traviata*; the air which the wretched woman sings after she has consummated her sacrifice and is insulted by her lover. The room applauded Clara's effective singing of this; Olivia alone knew how much the woman's own heart probably went along with the passionate utterance of these words.

It was over; and Westbrook edged his way dexterously through chairs and crinolines to Olivia's corner. He passed close to Clara; his sleeve brushed her elbow. She shivered, and half turned round; whereupon, he murmured the apology which good breeding demanded of a stranger, and passed on.

"I hope Miss Marston has not forgotten me, though it is nearly two years since we met?"

It was said in the peculiarly low soft voice he could

use with such effect on occasion. He looked that she should hold out her hand: she only bowed.

"No, I have not forgotten you, Mr. Westbrook." But he was not disconcerted; it was very natural she should think he had forgotten *her*, and resent it.

"I can assure you it has not been my fault that I have not seen you in the interval, Miss Marston. Every one seems to have conspired to keep your residence a mystery. At Fordingham they could only give me your brother's address. Your brother, when I met him, declined telling me whether you were in London or not. Miss Pringle was equally mysterious, though I went to an evening party at her house, in the fallacious hope of meeting you. The Pomfrets when I saw them in Paris really knew nothing of you; so you see every clue I had failed me; and I came to the conclusion — very unwillingly, I assure you — that you did not wish your retirement to be invaded."

"You were right in that conclusion." She hesitated whether she should say more; but thought it better to add: "There were circumstances which made it desirable that in our seclusion we should not be subject to visitors."

"I am sincerely sorry," he said, gravely, "to find the sad cause which has freed you from this necessity to exclude your friends; and I hope now that —"

It angered her to hear him even allude to her dear father. She cut him short with the words:

"My *friends*, Mr. Westbrook, are few. Of course, as long as I am in this house I must see all Mrs. Pomfret's visitors. I expect none, myself."

There was a pause; Westbrook leant a little forwarder, and said:

"I am distressed to find that you receive me in so hostile a spirit. I was in hopes that you wouldn't have allowed your brother's prejudices to influence you so completely as I see they do."

"My brother has been in the West Indies and in California for the last sixteen months. I think your name was never mentioned between us but once since I last saw you. He then told me he had met you in the street."

"But some one has been prejudicing you, Miss Marston; I see it in your manner. Do you remember the last conversation we had at that dance of the Pom-frets'? I do not know that you thought well of me then; I believe even then you'd been listening to all sorts of stories about me; but, at least, your manner was very different to what it now is."

"I am two years older, and I hope less foolish than I then was. At all events, I know more of the world, Mr. Westbrook."

"I must regret that knowledge if it makes you harder, less indulgent than you used to be. Do you know," he added, in a yet lower voice, "that I left Paris by a mid-day train, to-day, in consequence of a letter from Henry, in which he mentioned that you were staying here?"

Olivia's grey eyes looked at him, and through him, with an expression he found it impossible to translate.

"I am sorry for it," she said.

"Has Henry been telling you any nonsense about—" he began quickly, and stopped short.

"About *whom*?"

He now felt certain that she had heard of his Paris

flirtation. That accounted for it all. The only course was to take the bull by the horns.

"About Lady Harriet Tower. Really and truly it is the greatest nonsense in the world. I can assure you there's nothing in it; only you know how people gossip and exaggerate. But I'm wrong. You do *not* know that it's next to impossible for a man mixing much in the world to escape scandal. If he is friends with a married woman, all sorts of things are immediately said. I'm a great friend of General Tower's, and Lady Harriet is a nice little thing — very insignificant — but a good little woman, and I was a great deal there; whereupon, all my good-natured friends set afloat stories which have actually no foundation."

"I don't suppose that if they had any you would exactly confide in me, Mr. Westbrook," said Olivia, with infinite scorn in her manner. "And as I never heard of Lady Harriet before, it is quite superfluous to rebut any stories about her to me."

He could have bitten his tongue out; the position, however, was lost; there was no recovering it.

They were beginning a duet. Olivia leaned back against the wall. Julian took a vacant chair near her. She felt immensely relieved when, at the close of the music, Henry called out,

"Julian, I want to introduce you to Lady Helena; my cousin, Mr. Westbrook;" and Olivia saw herself freed for at least some time to come. Lady Helena was fond of talking, and she soon engaged Julian in an animated conversation.

"What do you think of the new singer?" Olivia heard her ask.

"A very pretty woman, and sings with a great deal

of expression — almost too much so; a little *tiré par les cheveux*, all that passion."

Clara, who had been watching Olivia for some time without appearing even to glance that way, now approached once more. Not only had she completely regained her self-command; she looked flushed and triumphant; probably in a great measure with the consciousness that *he* witnessed the enthusiasm of all these great people about her. But even now she was true to her part; the triumph was only betrayed by the eye and the cheek; the manner was still diffident and pleading rather than that of a successful prima donna.

"Dearest Olivia!" she exclaimed, raising her voice into that clear silvery distinctness which penetrated much further than louder voices, "I am so delighted to think we shall see each other constantly now. Mrs. Pomfret has just told me that I am to give her youngest daughter lessons twice a week."

Julian heard every word of this — as he was meant to do. He stared and frowned at the speaker, and lost the thread of what Lady Helena was saying.

"How came it," whispered Clara to Olivia, later in the evening, as she was wishing her good night, "how came it that you never told me you knew *him*?"

"You never asked me," replied Olivia.

As Westbrook strolled along Piccadilly to the Albany that night he murmured to himself,

"So they are intimate, are they? Confound it. That is a disagreeable coincidence. Not that *she* can have told her anything. She couldn't be such a fool; when she has everything in the world to lose, and nothing to gain by peaching against herself. But it is awkward, and may disconcert my plans. She is such a

spiteful, unforgiving little devil, that Clara. Deuced pretty she looked, to be sure; and the modest, unassuming dodge becomes her very well. She has managed her affairs very cleverly. I shouldn't wonder if she catches old Dumberly. I suppose that's her game."

CHAPTER XII.

A Discovery.

"EVERYTHING has gone off *most* satisfactorily," said Mrs. Pomfret, sitting down with a sigh of satisfaction, and the consciousness of well-merited repose, as the last carriage drove from the door. "That Madame Stellino was really everything to us. She is a dear little woman; so very unassuming and modest, and her singing quite makes one feel — all over, you know. Every one was talking about her, and as she is sure to become the fashion it was quite providential getting her before she becomes too common. And I've secured her to give you lessons, Mary; I want you to learn to sing in that — what you call *parlant* sort of style; it is so very telling. All the gentlemen were quite *raving* about her. As to Prince Pickleorwhiski, he could really hardly contain himself. It was very gratifying. By-the-by, my dear Olivia, I was so surprised to see that you and she were old friends. Did you know her abroad, my dear?"

"No, in London. We lived in the same house for some months."

"Dear me! how curious! But you didn't say so the other day when we talked about her?"

"Because I didn't know her present Italianised name. She was plain Mrs. Elliston then. She tells me she could not get on she found without Italianising it."

"Ah!" said Kate, yawning; "now I remember all about her. I thought I'd seen her before. Of course! She was the Mrs. Elliston we heard two or three years ago at a concert, and whom Julian was so very odd about; pretended not to admire her, when I know he *did* all the time. By-the-by, he was in one of his odd tempers this evening. What put him out, I wonder? He was in such high spirits when he came in, and so dreadfully cross before he went away!"

Mrs. Pomfret looked at Olivia and then at her daughter. I think she had a shrewd suspicion that he had not been received as he expected by the former; and she was sorry for it. Her opinions upon this, as upon many other subjects, had undergone a change. Julian's constant inquiries after Miss Marston during the last eighteen months had proved to his aunt that the impression Olivia had made upon him was not worn away. She used to think he was not a marrying man: she knew of so many flirtations and scrapes he had been in, that it took a long time to persuade her that he was ever likely to bind himself irrevocably to one woman. But he was no longer very young now, and if he could be brought so to bind himself she believed it would be a very blessed thing for him. Lionel, alas! no longer stood between Olivia and her nephew, and Olivia was clearly the only woman for whom he was ever likely to sacrifice his independence. It was not, indeed, a brilliant marriage, such as the handsome and popular Julian Westbrook might no

doubt make if he chose. In taking a penniless wife he would even have to curtail many of his luxuries and extravagancies. But Mrs. Pomfret, who, with all her follies, had curious instincts of good sense, and with whose warp of vulgarity was closely knit the woof of right feeling, had made up her mind that these drawbacks were as nothing when weighed in the scale with such a wife as Olivia would make. She had resolved, therefore, to encourage the idea as much as possible, and she could not help feeling, from both Olivia's manner and Julian's, that the first meeting had not been propitious.

"It was so very nice of Julian coming over from Paris for my party."

(Oh, the sinner! he had told her this with an unblushing face.)

"He certainly is a most *distang-ey*-looking man. Lord Dumberly was saying so; and on looking round the room there certainly was no one *more* so. I'm so sorry he didn't bring his corney. He might have accompanied Madame Stellino in a song. However, we can have that another night. They'll often meet here, I hope. Something so sweet in the voice and the corney together."

Olivia sat wondering in silence what would come of all this. Presently Mrs. Pomfret heaved herself upon her legs, and took the bedroom candle which the butler presented to her at that moment.

"Well, my dears, I suppose we'd better all go to bed. I'm very tired. You look so, too, my dear Olivia; though I must say I never saw you in such beauty as you were to-night. Quite made a sensation, I assure you. The duchess asked particularly who you were.

I told her you were a direct descendant of Robert the Bruce's henchman. By-the-by, Lady Caerlavrock never wished me good night, or said a word about the dinner, which I think she *might* have done. I suppose Henry is gone to smoke at his club. Your papa has been in bed for the last hour. Oh dear, how tired I am!" And she toiled up-stairs, followed by the three young ladies.

Old Mr. Harrington called the next day when the ladies were at luncheon. As a privileged person, who was admitted everywhere and at all hours, he was let in.

"Sorry I couldn't come to you last night, my dear madam. I only returned from the North, where I've been for the last three weeks, by the last train; found your card, but was too much *done* to go and dress. I'd been up at six in the morning; pretty well at sixty-eight — eh? ho! ho! Well, I haven't seen any of you since Henry's marriage was announced. Congratulate you, I'm sure, heartily. Famous little girl, Lady Helena; known her since she was in long clothes; and good woman her mother — very good."

"It is a marriage which gives both families satisfaction," said Mrs. Pomfret, importantly, and ignoring the last remark.

"I'm sure it must. I'm sure it must. I haven't seen Henry since he was a boy, but I hear he's uncommonly good-looking, and a universal favourite with the ladies; and I know how generous Pomfret's been to him, so Lady Caerlavrock has every reason to be satisfied. Well, and how has the world been treating *you*, young lady?" he asked, turning to Olivia. "I haven't seen you since we met at the Quintus Smiths'!

How's your aunt, eh? Quite well? that's right. You know Algy Tharpe's abroad? That queer fish, his father, now the boy's *away*, regrets him a little, I think, and appreciates him rather more, though he wouldn't own it for the world — ho! ho!"

"I hear he is a most *objectionable* person," said Mrs. Pomfret: "irreligious, and democratic, and all that sort of thing. Indeed, from all that I can gather, the neighbourhood generally is one with which we shall not care to associate much. How did Sir Warwick Milton manage, now, do you know, Mr. Harrington? Did he visit every one? It is so very difficult to draw the *line*, eh?"

"Well, as to visiting, my dear madam, there was not much of that sort of thing went on at the Abbey of late years, for sundry reasons. But he knew every one about — oh dear, yes! — hem — and was on friendly terms, too, whenever he was there, which was but seldom."

"Ah! I forgot; owing to his low connexion, of course, he *would* know every one, naturally. Lady Milton drank herself to death, didn't she? Horrible, to be sure! And the father is some drunken apothecary in the village, isn't he?"

"He was, my dear madam. He died, at last, of delirium tremens some few weeks ago."

"What could have made Sir Warwick marry such a woman?" exclaimed Kate, with indignation. "A man in his position, too! So disgraceful!"

"The disgrace, my dear young lady, came afterwards. Lady Milton's conduct made it disgraceful, not her birth. He was just one-and-twenty when he married, and she was then the loveliest creature I've ever

set eyes on. He was madly in love with her; so were all the young men about the county; only Sir Warwick was the biggest fish, and she played him skilfully, and landed him. She didn't care *that* for him," and the old gentleman snapped his fingers, "as he very soon learnt. She led him a pretty life, poor fellow!"

"Was her conduct ever——?" and Mrs. Pomfret filled up the hiatus with an expressive nod.

"No; her conduct was never — *that*," replied the old gentleman. "Had it been he might have got rid of her. She was a low, cunning, vulgar-minded woman, with the most violent temper I ever met with, and so desperately addicted to drink that she would get hold of the spirit of wine when everything else was kept from her."

"Dear, dear, how shocking! Well, how any woman *can* acquire such a taste!" said Mrs. Pomfret, finishing her third glass of sherry.

"How any man — particularly such a man as we have heard Sir Warwick is — could marry such a woman is what passes *my* comprehension," cried Kate.

"Ah, but my dear Miss Kate, she was very different, to all appearance, at least, before her marriage. I saw her myself. Her manners then were so shy and retiring. She could blush and look as simple and innocent, while she was playing off all these boys one against the other. She had no more heart than this table-spoon, or she would have gone wrong; but she was a clever actress, and she managed to make poor Warwick believe that she loved him. She very soon threw off the mask. Why, he knew, of course, that she was ill educated, but he thought her naturally refined and tender-hearted, and had visions of educating

her himself. He was a romantic youth, and looked forward to living in a sort of Arcadia, with this unsophisticated bride of his. She soon taught him better. He found he could do nothing with her. He tried every system: at first, kindness and indulgence. Then in disgust, he left her for a time; but the orgies she carried on with this drunken old father and some other choice spirits of the same sort created such a scandal, that Sir Warwick, hearing of it, came home, and mounted the strictest guard over her himself. Yet, in spite of it, she constantly eluded him. The scenes that used to take place between them were awful. I was witness of one, myself; but I was almost the only person he ever admitted inside the doors. He felt the shame so very keenly. Poor fellow! how he stood it as he did, I can't think. At last, finding all of no avail, he put her in charge of a medical man and a nurse, with orders that she was never to be left by herself, day or night, and he himself went abroad; where, during the last few years, he almost constantly resided. He used to come over once a year, that he might look after his property, which he left in the hands of an agent, and also to judge for himself that his wife was properly taken care of. And that went on till her death, eighteen months ago."

"One can't help feeling for him very much, I'm sure," said Mrs. Pomfret. "I understand that he has taken such a disgust to the place, that he says he shall never live there again himself. But with his fine fortune, and not being an *old* man, of course he will marry again, eh? I hope we may make his acquaintance, for we hear he is such a delightful person, don't we, Kate?"

"Yes. Isn't he very handsome, Mr. Harrington?"

"Baronets of large fortune always are, my dear Miss Kate, — ho! ho! But joking apart, Warwick Milton *was* an uncommonly good-looking fellow some years ago. He's got what our French neighbours call *un peu farouche*, — neglects his appearance, and so on — which is a pity, and shuns all society. No, there is very little chance of his marrying again. He had such a sickener of it, that it'll last him for life, I'm afraid."

"Oh, Mr. Harrington, we must *hope* not. It would be too sad; if it was only for the sake of the baronetcy, which becomes extinct, I believe? Why, it's a positive *duty* for him to marry."

"I doubt whether he'll think so, my dear madam. He has his own ideas of duty. He is a peculiar fellow, you know. He has a great dread of pretty young ladies, ho! ho! ho! And he believes that if one consented to marry him, it would be, like the late Lady Milton, for the sake of his title and fortune. If he ever *does* marry, therefore, it must be some girl who doesn't know the worldly advantages he has to offer, but takes him for himself."

Mrs. Pomfret's countenance fell.

"Really, I don't see how that is to be managed — eh? How is a girl to be in ignorance of his position? And it is quite a mistake to imagine that girls, *well* brought up, are so worldly and mercenary, — quite. I'm sure we know some who have made very poor marriages, and are really very happy. If Sir Warwick is so delightful a person *any* one might fall in love with him, eh? And as to his finding a girl who knew nothing about him, why, it could only be in a railway

carriage, or something of that sort, where she didn't hear his name. It's absurd."

"So it is, my dear madam." Mr. Harrington's face wore an amused look as he added, "That's why I don't think it likely he ever will marry."

Olivia had been an interested, — nay, excited listener to the above conversation, in which she had taken no part. Once or twice she had burned to ask a question, and had refrained. She now rose and walked to the window, her heart beating fast, her brain throbbing; doubtful still whether the strange and improbable idea which had been born within her, and had been growing up, stronger and stronger, during the last few minutes, had any foundation, except in a disordered fancy, which had fed one thought until it assimilated and absorbed unto itself all others.

She looked over the wire blind on to the gloomy pavement. She saw absolutely nothing; it all seemed to swim before her. She knew they were leaving the dining-room; she heard the door opened; she heard Mrs. Pomfret's voice on the staircase. She turned round: the old gentleman was making the girls laugh, and chuckling himself, over one of his own jokes, as he followed them out of the room. A sudden, irrepressible desire seized her to say something — to ask him one question, now that she might do so without three pairs of eyes fixed on her.

"Mr. Harrington," she called out. Her voice was thick, and it trembled; but he heard her, and turned back. She leant upon the back of a chair.

"Mr. Harrington — do you know any one — near — near — Westbridge, of the name of *Thompson*?"

He gave an unconscious little start; raised his eye-

brows, while the corners of his mouth twitched drolly; then he shut the door gently.

"My dear young lady, how did you come to know anything about that — person?"

"*My* question is already answered, Mr. Harrington. I see that my suspicion was right. Can you — oh! *can* you tell me anything of him? In my great trouble he was my only friend. He was so good to my dear father, and did everything for me when *he* was taken; and I know — I am sure — that he has thought me — that — that — in short, that I have appeared ungrateful to him. If you know where he is, will you tell him that you have seen me, and that I can never, never forget his kindness? He was misled — purposely misled, about me — I am sure he was. I wrote to him, but, I suppose, he never got my letter. He would have answered, I think, if he had."

"He is abroad now; but I shall see him before very long, I dare say. Depend on it I will give him your message."

Then they went up-stairs. Olivia was lighter at heart than she had felt for many a long day.

CHAPTER XIII.

Julian under Discussion.

SHE was lighter at heart; for now that she knew who he really was, and all about him, he did not seem so far off, so lost to her as he had done before she possessed any clue to his past or present history. Not that the mystery shrouding his life had ever disquieted her: she had such perfect faith in him that she never

doubted but that he had some good reason for keeping the facts of his story from her. And now the knowledge of his worldly position had certainly no power to elate her; rather the contrary, for it seemed, in many ways, to set a barrier between them. But at least she knew how to reach him: she should hear of him, — might see him: he no longer was of that shadowy world to which belong those who cross our life-path for an instant, and are swallowed up in the darkness, without leaving a trace behind them.

She needed no explanation of the circumstances which had led him to assume another name, and up to the very end to conceal his rank from her. It was easy to conceive why, when that name had become a byword, he shrank from observation, and how, with his tastes and habits, he preferred living as an obscure artist, whose antecedents were unknown, to receiving the inquiries and condolences of his friends, when he went amongst them. Nor was she at a loss to understand his conduct towards herself, in this matter. Mr. Harrington had supplied the right clue to it, when he said that if Sir Warwick ever married, it must be to a woman who was ignorant of his station and fortune. After his bitter experience, it was not surprising that such a character as his should desire, even when the feeling was no warmer than friendship, to test how far he was valued for himself. And when the feeling deepened into something stronger, more and more strenuous would be this desire; more and more anxious would he be to hide those adventitious gifts of fortune which had been his undoing twenty years before.

Then, with a sharp pang, the thought arose that she could never any more be to him as one so tested.

She had rejected the happiness offered to her, when she believed him to be an obscure artist. Was not the door shut against her for ever? How would he ever be brought to understand that she had refused to be his wife because she thought that compassion, solely, moved him to ask her? That his lands, and his wealth, and his title were as nothing to her,—nay, that, like the Lady of Burleigh, she could find it in her heart to sigh,

Oh that he
Were once more that landscape painter,
Which did win my heart from me!

Taught, as he had been, by the severest lesson which it can be given to a man to learn, that where he stakes most, he may be most deceived, was it to be looked for that he should again run a similar risk and, after her rejection of him on his own personal merits, that he should come forward with the make-weight of his social position?

It was hardly to be looked for. With the tinge of bitter sarcasm which coloured his thoughts at times, the probability of his success under the altered circumstances might cross his mind; and the blood of indignant shame rushed into her face as this possibility occurred to her. It was but for a moment. “No,” she said to herself, “he knows me too well for that. If he ever asks me again to be his wife, it will be because he believes — because he *knows* that I love him. I do not suppose that he will ever do so — that he will ever wish to renew our old intimacy under his own name — perhaps it would not be the same thing, he may think. But if he can ever resolve to break all his own

vows and self-made laws, so far as to seek me now — why, I know that it will be because he is sure that all the riches and honours in the world would not weigh with me, but that I take him for himself — and for himself alone.”

The next day Clara gave her first lesson to Mary. Mother and daughter were equally charmed with Madame Stellino. Kate was less enthusiastic; but then she had got into an ugly habit lately of disparaging any woman who was much admired. Olivia was an exception; but then Olivia disarmed hostility of this kind by remaining so much in the background. Had she come the least more forward, Kate's friendship would not have held her tongue from saying some sharp things, as indeed we shall see by-and-by.

“Her manner is too *doucereux* — don't you think so?” she whispered to Olivia, while the lesson was going on. “She is like Uriah Heap, so very 'umble, that really I can't quite believe she is sincere; and as to her beauty, why, if you come to examine her critically, her eyes are very ugly — positively ugly.”

“They are very expressive,” answered Olivia, glad to avoid giving an opinion on Kate's first proposition.

“You will stay to luncheon, Madame Stellino?” said Mrs. Pomfret, at the end of the lesson. “We shall be going down presently. Miss Marston and you, I find, are old acquaintances.”

“Ah! more than acquaintances, are we not, dear?” said the little singing-mistress, taking Olivia's hand in both of hers. “She is the best friend I have ever had, though every one is very kind to me, I'm sure. I

have no right to expect all the kindness I have met with."

Luncheon was announced, and with it — Mr. Julian Westbrook.

"So glad to see you, my dear Julian!" exclaimed his aunt; "for I hardly had a moment's conversation with you the other night. Full of engagements, I suppose, as usual? Come, let us go down-stairs. Ah, by-the-by, you don't know Madame Stellino, do you? My nephew, Mr. Westbrook. You must become better acquainted, being both so musical. Your corney, Julian, would go so sweetly with her voice."

Madame Stellino returned Westbrook's bow with perfect self-possession, but without looking at him. She managed to get hold again of Olivia's hand, and went down-stairs holding it, and laughing, a low, rippling laugh (yet subdued and chastened, as became her present character), while she talked in an undertone upon some trivial subject. Olivia was petrified at her coolness. It seemed scarcely credible that this man, whom she now met with such apparent indifference, was the cause of all Clara's sin and shame; that he had once been the object of her passionate love, and for long, long afterwards the object of her reproaches and tears.

He probably understood her, and guessed how much of that indifference was real, as he also divined her motive for parading her intimacy with Olivia, which she evidently did. To find her here was, of course, the very last thing in the world he wished; but *he* also, when he took the trouble, was a decent actor; so here were two people, the relations between whom were assuredly nearer akin to tragedy than to comedy, play-

ing light and airy parts, less to deceive their audience, perhaps, than to deceive each other.

Thus, for instance:

Clara (in an audible murmur to Olivia). Do you remember our old Italian lessons, dear? Ah! how I used to enjoy them. I always say I owe my pronunciation to you.

Mary. And it is very pure, for I heard Signor Degl' Occhi say so.

Julian (to Mrs. Pomfret). What a lucky fellow Henry is! Lady Helena is really charming. You must all be delighted with her.

Mrs. P. It is a marriage which gives great satisfaction to *both* families.

Mary (laughing). She is so much in love, you know, Julian, that she thinks Henry absolute perfection.

Kate. Oh, so they all do.

Julian (glancing at Olivia). There's the advantage of arriving fresh from Jamaica — no good-natured person to spread good-natured stories about one.

Kate. Oh, that's the penalty *you* pay, Julian, for being a man of fashion.

Clara. They have sent me a box from the Covent Garden Opera for Tuesday, but of course I cannot go alone. Would you come with me, dear?

Olivia. I have promised Mrs. Pomfret to go with her — for the first time. We shall see you there, perhaps.

Clara. Ah, from the grand tier you are not likely to see poor little me — somewhere on the third or fourth, I suppose. But indeed, though I want to go, I shan't have the courage to go alone.

Mrs. P. (to Julian). I'm sure I never heard of *anything* being said against Henry, either at Jamaica or elsewhere. I can't think what you mean.

Julian. Nothing ever *is* said against eldest sons. They are like kings, ain't they, Miss Marston? No one has the bad taste to repeat scandal about the heir to a large fortune. It is only us small fry who can be fastened on with impunity by the hornets of society.

Olivia made as though she heard not this appeal. She went on talking in an undertone to Clara. Mr. Pomfret and his son, who had been closeted in the library, discussing matters of business for the last hour, now appeared. They seldom came in to luncheon — were seldom at home, indeed, at this hour. But now hearing that Julian was here, they walked in, and found vacant chairs on either side of Madame Stellino.

Julian. Just talking of you, Harry — saying what a lucky dog you are.

Henry. Thank you. When am I to return the compliment? You oughtn't to let me get the start of you in this way; only you're so hard to please. Madame Stellino, let me give you some of this *pâté de foie gras*.

Julian. Ah! if I were in your shoes, my boy—"

Henry. By-the-by, I hear there is a fair lady in Paris heart-broken at your departure!

Julian. Stuff!

Mr. Pomfret (with conviction). Julian, follow Harry's example as quick as you can. That's *my* advice—you know I seldom give it.

Julian. I will do you that justice, uncle. Unfortunately, like some other rare things, though valuable, it isn't of much service to me. I assure you I heartily

wish I were married — that is, to the right person, of course. I have seen so much of life, and of woman's deception, that I *am* difficult to please; and my star has not yet come into conjunction with the right person's, I'm afraid, as astrologers would say.

Kate (with a very knowing smile). How about Grosvenor-square — eh, Julian? Your star ought to be ashamed of itself, if it doesn't very *often* hover over there!

Julian. Isn't it delightful, Miss Marston, to hear all my relations pitching into me for not marrying — a poor devil, who is heir to nothing a year? as though prudent, sensible young ladies ever married men who had not, at least, expectations.

Mrs. P. Nonsense, Julian. You know very well there are plenty of people who would marry you, if you *chose*. You've quite enough. Only hitherto, as Henry says, you've been so difficult to please. Madame Stellino, you're eating nothing.

Clara. Oh yes, I am, Mrs. Pomfret; only I was listening to Mr. Westbrook's apologies for not being married (*laughing*). I know so little of the world, you know: I am being instructed. I suppose a gentleman who has no expectations may encourage them with impunity among the numerous poor women who fall in love with him? Is it so?

The words, accompanied by a light laugh, and by a mischievous glance across the table—just as a clever child points some harmless shaft of satire — fell like a bomb between Westbrook and Olivia. To the latter, Clara's extraordinary powers of dissimulation, under the circumstances, seemed little short of miraculous. That she should be able to speak to him thus — that

she should put her finger upon the identical spot which had been the curse of her young life, and do this with a smile upon her lip, before the man's very face — it seemed incredible. Even Westbrook looked disconcerted for a moment: he lowered his eyes. It was viewed by his uncle's family at large as an amusing instance of the power of guileless innocence over the world, the flesh, and the devil. Father and son were especially pleased: I think they did not very much dislike seeing Julian discomfited. "A very good little woman, as simple as a school-girl apparently, that Madame — what's her name? — of your's, my dear," said Mr. Pomfret afterwards, to his better half. "Did you see how she roasted old Julian?" laughed Henry, to his sisters. "And she is a deuced pretty little woman. I don't think Julian altogether relished it."

After that speech of Clara's nothing worth record passed. There were shreds of talk, but Westbrook and Clara cut across each other no more, except just at parting, when Mrs. Pomfret said:

"Positively, we must fix a night when you can come and dine with us, Madame Stellino; and you too, Julian — and bring your corney — and we can have some quiet music in the evening. Let me see, what night are we free, girls?"

"Wednesday is our only free night next week."

"Thank you. I shall be charmed to dine with you on Wednesday," said Clara, in a low voice, but not so low as to prevent Julian's hearing what she said, which it was meant he should: "to dine, and to sing afterwards, as much as you please. As to the *cornet*, I don't know what to say. I'm afraid I am not accustomed to sing with a wind instrument (and amateurs'

instruments are often particularly windy). I think its superior volume of sound, you know, would quite drown my poor little voice. Besides," she added, laughing, "from all I hear of Mr. Westbrook, it might be dangerous to my peace of mind. If I do not wish to swell the number of his victims I had better see as little of him as possible."

"Monstrous sharp little woman!" muttered Henry. Julian pretended not to have heard. He turned his back, and talked energetically to Kate about the colour of her gown. The girls were going to walk to Lady Caerlavrock's with their brother. They declared that Julian should accompany them. As the carriage was at the door, and Mrs. Pomfret said she was going to drive with Olivia, Julian saw there was no chance of effecting what he so earnestly desired — an interview with the latter. She had left the room with Madame Stellino, and he saw her no more; for she went up to put on her bonnet, and did not come down till she had seen the cousins leave the house.

This hurried, whispered word had passed between her and Clara, in the hall, under the very nose of a powdered footman:

"Wasn't I brave, Olivia? Don't you give me credit for that last stroke?"

"You have wonderful powers of acting, certainly; but what is the use of it? For whose benefit do you go out of your way to do all this? He is quite indifferent about you, as you see."

"You don't know him as well as I do. If I don't show him that I'm not to be *crushed*" — here her eyes flashed — "that I'm no longer afraid of him — that I no longer care for his worthless love, he will try and

crush *me*. He would do anything to get me out of this house now; but it is too late. Oh, I know him better than you do, Olivia, though he *does* want you to be his wife."

Her look drove through Olivia like a sword, as she said this with suppressed bitterness; but the look, encountering nothing that it could slay in its passage, fell harmless. The words did not trouble Olivia, except as revealing a jealousy which she could not but acknowledge was natural under the circumstances.

"As you know him so well," she said, calmly, "you know what value to attach to such attentions, transferred from one woman to another as easily as he changes his coat."

"He is in earnest, however, now. I know him, and I tell you I am sure of it." Then, in a voice that shook, she added, suddenly — "Tell me, Olivia, if he asks you, shall you marry him?"

Then Olivia flushed up to her temples.

"You don't know *me*, Clara — that is very evident. I would sooner beg my bread in the streets. I feel such a contempt for him now, that I look back with wonder to the time when — perhaps I thought differently. He is a worthless man. Try and not trouble your head about him further. And when you meet him in this house, as you must, I suppose, take my advice, Clara, and keep as clear of him as possible. You got out of the singing business very cleverly. That is your only dignified course, to avoid him in every way. Let neither vanity, nor anything else, induce you ever to renew an intimacy which once caused you so much misery. Good-bye. I can't stay any longer; Mrs. Pomfret will be waiting."

She ran up-stairs. The footman, who was almost tired of this whispered conference, opened the hall door, and Clara, with her roll of music under her arm, slipped out. She was due at a house hard by at three, and it was now past three: but she did not go there yet awhile. In a state of fierce excitement, she let her feet carry her whithersoever they would, up one street and down another, while her thoughts fed upon the only subject in the world that lay near her heart. It was in vain to talk as she had done: to try and deceive herself no less than Olivia, by using such words as "scorn" and "hatred." They had met now, after a long interval of time, and she knew that, in spite of his conduct, she loved him as passionately as ever. Could she, by any means in her power, bring him back to her feet? She would have washed *his* with her tears; but that would be very unavailing with such a man, she knew. Sharper weapons, fitter for this world's warfare, she must use, if she hoped for success; and vanity, no less than passion, urged her to arm herself for the enterprise.

After thrusting some necessary cards in at twenty or thirty doors, the two ladies drove round and round the Park. It was still early in the afternoon; there was nothing passing to divert Mrs. Pomfret's attention from the matter in her thoughts, so, after a while, she up and spake:

"Our conversation at luncheon puts me in mind to say something to you, my dear. I dare say you remember, formerly, my saying a good deal to you about Julian, warning you that he wasn't a marrying man, and a desperate flirt, and so on? I dare say you haven't forgotten it?"

"No, I remember it quite well."

"He's a very changed man, my dear, since then. Having prejudiced you, perhaps, originally, I think it but right to tell you what is the truth now. He has the makings in him of a very good husband, — believe me he has."

She waited for a reply, but none came. Olivia was in a very uncomfortable position. She felt that the conversation was nearing with frightful rapidity the subject which, of all others, she most dreaded discussing with Mrs. Pomfret. It was a rocky headland, looming through the mist to the occupant of a rudderless craft. What could she say? What could she do? Her hands were tied in this detestable business: she could explain nothing, and yet she felt that some explanation, some sort of justification, would, if Mrs. Pomfret pushed her very hard, be difficult to avoid.

"I observed both the other night and to-day, my love, such a change in your *manner* towards him from what it used to be, which is the reason of my speaking. I know that you haven't met for two years, and that you particularly wished him *not* to know where you were living all this time, owing I fancy to your brother's not being very cordial with him, — eh? However, you can't sacrifice your prospects to your brother's fancies entirely, and now that you have come out again into the world, if you like Julian as much as I am sure you *used* to, why I can only say, I think you might do worse. I've never seen him so faithful to the idea of any girl before as he is to you. I don't say that he mayn't have amused himself in the mean time. I dare say you'll find some one in the world to tell you that he has. But young men *will* be young men, you know.

One must look at these things in a sensible point of view without any high-flown — what you may call *romance*. There was a time, I confess it, when I didn't think Julian would ever have steadied down to be a marrying man. Now, his uncle and I really begin to have hopes. We think that if he fell into good hands, he really has the makings of quite as steady a husband as — as most men."

This, perhaps, would hardly have been a very encouraging view of the case to Olivia had she seriously regarded it, but Mrs. Pomfret was anxious not to seem to exaggerate her nephew's claims as heir presumptive to every conjugal virtue. Olivia still said nothing, so the good lady went on.

"He has twelve hundred a year. That's not riches, certainly; still it's enough to live on with economy; and you're not extravagant. Perhaps he might get something, too. He has so many friends among great people, you know. It's astonishing how much they think of Julian. And he's very clever — there's no doubt of it; only, unfortunately, he has been so idle up to the present; but if you marry him he'll get on; oh! I've no doubt about it."

"I shall never marry Mr. Westbrook, Mrs. Pomfret."

"Why not, my dear? I think two years ago you would have married him. You can't have seen any one in the interval, I suppose, whom you prefer? As to that young Tharpe, you told me yourself it was all your aunt's nonsense. I can't help fancying things went to some length between you and Julian two years ago. At all events, *he* has remained quite unchanged. I'm sure I never saw him, never had a letter from him,

that he didn't ask about you. You know, Olivia, that as long as my dear lost angel was alive I wanted you for *him*, and I was dead against Julian. Perhaps I was unjust towards him. Yes," she added, with her handkerchief to her eyes, "if my Lionel was living I shouldn't be pleading Julian's cause, my dear, you may depend upon that. For I look on you as a very superior creature, Olivia, cut out by nature for keeping a man straight and steady, and getting what you may call an *influence* over him."

"I am afraid you greatly over-rate my abilities, Mrs. Pomfret. I have need—I feel it every hour of the day—of some one to guide *me*, on the contrary. I am full of faults that your kindness blinds you to, perhaps. I am proud, and often very intolerant, and irritable. I should never do as the wife of a man whom I could not respect as well as love. I have no vocation for guiding a husband, and keeping him straight by influence, and so on."

"Well, my dear, one must be lenient—a *little* lenient to the follies of youth. When a man is faithful to one person at the end of two years, it shows, I think, that he has sown his wild oats."

"People's ideas of faithfulness differ. Mr. Westbrook has long passed the age when it is necessary to be lenient to any follies or sins he may commit on the score of youth. He is of an age to stand or fall, in a woman's estimation, upon what he *is*—not upon what he may become. However, all this, dear Mrs. Pomfret, is beside the point. The real question is, whether under any possible circumstances I could ever love your nephew enough to marry him. I had better tell you frankly, at once, that whatever I may once have

thought, I now know that I could never love him. I say nothing about respect; I leave that quite out of the question, for I have said enough to show you that a marriage between us is impossible."

"Well, my dear, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry. I can't help hoping you'll change your mind, because, really, looking at it altogether, though not a brilliant marriage for you in point of money, I think, in your present position, it's as good a thing as you could do. I think you'd find it answered better than you expect. There *must* always be some drawback, and Julian really has his good points, and you'd do a great deal with him — a great deal, I'm sure. I wish you would see it in that light. I can't think what can have changed you so about him, for there *was* a time when you were always inclined to make excuses for him, and now, I see —"

"Dear Mrs. Pomfret! please say no more: it pains me so much to talk on this subject. It very little signifies why my opinion of Mr. Westbrook is changed. I can explain nothing. I can only tell you that any regard I ever had for him is quite gone. As your nephew, I shall be civil whenever I meet him in your house; but I had rather meet him as seldom as possible. Do not ask more of me, for, if you encourage this idea of his about me, I — I shall have to leave you, dear Mrs. Pomfret. I debated whether I ought to come at all, knowing that I should probably meet him; and now, if you urge this upon me, I cannot stay — I cannot, indeed. Of course, I have no right to expect that you should shut the door upon your nephew; no wish, indeed, that you should do so, only be kind enough not to throw me purposely in his way, to let me see as

little of him as I can; in short, not to take part against me in this."

Mrs. Pomfret wondered much; but she had no choice save to give a reluctant consent to Olivia's request. Time — she had great faith in time. This little difference, whatever it might be, which had arisen between Julian and Olivia would come all right after a few weeks, no doubt. She did not at all abandon hope, though she had sufficient knowledge of Olivia to perceive that the affair henceforward must be left to take its own course, without a helping hand from her. She puzzled herself thinking what could have happened to make Olivia so severe and bitter about Julian; and she half promised herself, when a convenient season offered, to question him on the subject.

That night, about half-past ten o'clock, as Olivia sat alone in the drawing-room — the others had just set off for a couple of parties, — a cab drove up to the door, and a ring at the bell resounded through the house. Olivia laid down her book and listened. Who could it be at this hour? She heard the hall door opened. There was a sound of voices down below, and then of some one coming up-stairs. She went pale, and her heart beat quick: she stood up as the door of the drawing-room was thrown aside, and the figure of a man, bronzed and bearded, in a well worn and very dusty shooting-jacket, with a travelling-pouch slung across his shoulder, appeared on the heels of the servant, who announced with imperturbable calm, "Mr. Marston."

With a little cry of pleasure she sprang forward, and was folded in her brother's arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Wet Sunday.

THE meeting of brother and sister after their long parting, and their common trouble, is of those things that cannot be described. There was little said, on either side, at first; for the woman's tears flowed silently, as she lay there in her brother's arms, and he too well understood the mingled feelings which sought this natural relief, not to let it have its course. By degrees, however, broken sentences—question and answer, as to his voyage and his landing, as to all that had befallen each, since the last letters were exchanged, followed in rapid succession; and then, as they drew two low arm-chairs together near the fire (for though May, it was quite an evening to enjoy one), the links of more connected conversation formed themselves.

It was Saturday night, and twelve o'clock found them still sitting there. The Pomfrets would soon be home, and Rupert had no wish in his present condition to encounter Olivia's hostess and her daughters. He had only landed that evening at Southampton, and felt tired and dirty.

"I dropped my things at Farrance's as I came along. Being near you, I thought it the best place I could go to for two or three nights till I could look round me. Of course it would be too expensive for a continuance. You will remain here with the Pomfrets a little longer, I suppose, before you come and we set up our household gods together?"

"They are very kind in wishing me to stay with

them as long as I can, and even to accompany them to Milton-Eyre, when they leave town the middle of next month, but I shall be glad, for many reasons, when I am in my own home again, however humble it is."

"I must have a few weeks before deciding on anything definitely. When I have seen Claxton, and had a talk with him, I shall see how our affairs stand."

"You must not hurry on my account. As I said before, I have a home here for as long as I like. Mary is grown such a darling, Rupert."

"Is she?" said he, smiling. "Made a great deal of, I suppose, then, in all this fine society? You can't think how odd it seems getting among civilised people again. The very look of these rooms — they're nothing particular, I dare say — but the comfort of those easy-chairs in their clean chintz covers, the flowers and books about — it is all so unlike what I've been surrounded by. And so Mary is grown up a pretty girl, is she? I always thought she would."

"I said she was 'a darling.' I don't think I ought to raise your expectations about her looks. Some people admire her, but she is not at all the sort of girl to make a great effect in society. It is in the fire-light of home she shines."

"Ah!" said her brother, with a disappointed intonation, "well, I'm sorry, for I'm afraid a long abstinence from the sight of a really pretty English face has made me a greater fool on the subject than I was;" and he laughed as he kissed his sister. "Few brothers care much about their sisters' looks, I believe, but it makes me happy to see you, Olivia, twice as hand-

some as you were two years ago, in spite of all you've gone through, my poor child! There is the quarter striking. Good night. God bless you!"

Mary returned from her two parties with a headache. She brightened up wonderfully on hearing of the visitor whom Olivia had had, and while the other ladies were kind and voluble in their questions, she drank in silently, with eager eyes and a heightened colour, every detail which Olivia gave of her brother's voyage and arrival.

But, in spite of this, Nature would have her way, and the following morning she was so unwell that her mother forbade her getting up. The family apothecary was sent for, and pronounced that she must be kept quiet for a day or two; there was no cause for uneasiness, but a tendency to fever made it desirable that the impatient patient should not be exposed to cold or excitement. They went to church, leaving her, poor child, a little cross at the close imprisonment; and on their return a modified edition of the bronzed and bearded Rupert presented himself; still shaggy, and in clothes which had rather a savage cut about them, but scrupulously clean at least, and in boots, the polish of which reflected credit on Farrance's shoe-black.

Little Mary, hearing the bell, stole out of bed, and with nothing but her dressing-gown on, peeped at him from over the banisters. She could only see, from her bird's-eye view, that he had a long black beard, and that there was a little bald place at the top of his head, — the result of West Indian climate, no doubt, for his years could not justify it. She returned to bed, however, nourishing a belief that capillary adornments were quite superfluous to manly beauty; indeed, perhaps rather

effeminate, unless in the shape of a beard; there could be no effeminacy about *that*.

It was a wet afternoon; and all London ladies know how doubly pleasant an agreeable visitor is on a wet Sunday. They have diligently read their *Court Journal*; they have skimmed the lightest of the articles in the *Saturday Review*; they have compunctions of conscience in taking up the novel which they left last night, and are dying to finish; conventionality forbids them even the poor solace of pulling about a little bit of crochet (because it is styled "*work*," — Heaven save the mark; and is therefore a more heinous sin than absolute idleness, with slander and Sunday dinner-parties). How blest is a pleasant visitor then at such a time! And Rupert, though never what is called a brilliant talker, could be very agreeable in company that he liked. He had now a great deal that was new to tell and to describe; and the delightful novelty of finding himself once more among ladies of average intelligence who were interested in all he said, gave zest to his narrative. In the middle of it all, Henry came in, and the meeting between the two men was very cordial.

"Delighted to see you, Marston! I began to be afraid you wouldn't arrive in time to assist at the august ceremony which is to make me a happy man on Wednesday fortnight. I want you to be my best man, old fellow."

Mrs. Pomfret coughed.

"My dear Henry, did you forget your cousin, Julian, who —"

"Oh, no, I didn't forget him, only I'd rather have Marston as my best man — that's all."

"I'm very much flattered, Pomfret. I never was

one in my life, and I don't know what the duties of the post are; but if you think such an uncouth-looking savage as I am won't disgrace your wedding, I shall be very glad to be your friend. I'm afraid the duties are not arduous enough to try my friendship," he added, smiling and looking round, — "I have a great debt of gratitude to pay every member of this family for their kindness to my sister, which I shall never be able to discharge."

"Beautifully turned phrase, by Jove! You must have been spouting among the Mormons. You paid them a visit, didn't you? I hope you didn't imbibe polygamy — eh?"

"Oh! Henry, we have been having the most amusing account of Mr. Marston's hurried journey to the great Salt Lake and back, and of all those curious, horrid people there," said Kate. "It's too shocking! And then such a funny account of the people he met at San Francisco. Do you know, Mr. Marston, you ought to write a book, or give a lecture at the Royal Institution, and appear in London society as a star. It would be such fun, wouldn't it, Olivia?"

"Now, Miss Pomfret, you're satirical, and that's not kind on a fellow who has been exiled from his native land for two years, and living for the last nine months among sharpers, and cut-throats, and worshippers of Brigham Young. I haven't a claim or desire to be admitted into the sidereal system; and if I got there under false pretences, you would be the first to greet me with the words of Watts, or who is the great poet? who has written,

Twinkle, twinkle, *little* star,
How I wonder what you are!"

All the Pomfrets laughed and declared that it was evident that he only declined appearing in the world as "the great traveller," because he preferred the rôle of a wit.

"But then, for that, my dear fellow," said Henry, "you must shave. No wit was ever known with a beard like a rabbi. It doesn't suit a *diseur de bons mots*. Indeed, I'm not sure that it'll suit Threadneedle-street, or wherever it is old Claxton hangs out; though I grant it is a shame to part with such a beard, and fling one of Nature's choicest gifts back into her face as it were."

"I am afraid it must go," sighed Rupert, with a comical shake of the head, as he stroked the silky hair which was doomed for sacrifice. "I'm afraid it must go."

"Beards have a good deal gone *out*," remarked Mrs. Pomfret, as though she were talking of crinoline or tight sleeves, instead of what Henry, with his euphemistic language, styled "one of Nature's choicest gifts." It would have sounded odd to say that eyes or noses had gone out; but that never struck Mrs. Pomfret.

"After the Crimea they became so very common, and now even the shopkeepers wear them," said Kate.

This was just one of those little speeches which Mary would never have made. It was not meant as uncivil; for, indeed, Kate still felt (only in a well regulated, and very different degree from two years ago) a liking, even an admiration, for Rupert. Perhaps it may have been intended as a friendly hint, from the lofty regions of fashion in which she now soared, to the wanderer on his return; but, for all that, it showed an obtuseness, which formed the strongest contrast to

her sister's acute sensitiveness and delicacy of touch. Rupert was by no means a vain man, but if he had a personal weakness it was his beard. To be told by a young lady that he shared that weakness with shopkeepers was not quite pleasant.

"All sorts of things which were *in* when I left England have gone *out*, of course," he said, laughing: "and if I had any proper sense of shame I oughtn't to have appeared here in these clothes. I suppose I must get rigged out to-morrow, Pomfret; shorn and shod, and all the rest of it, after I've been in the City. I am going now to drive down to Dulwich, as I am sure to find Claxton at home on a wet Sunday evening, and I ought of course to see him as soon as possible."

"Can't you come back and dine here?" said Mrs. Pomfret. "Remember there will be always a knife and fork here whenever you choose to come."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pomfret; I should not be back in time, to-day. To-morrow, after all my business is over, and I am properly shaved," he added, glancing at Kate, with a half smile, "I shall be delighted."

"I am sorry to say you'll only find Olivia. Unfortunately we dine out. Not *Mary*; but then Mary will have to keep her room, I'm afraid, for some days, so you and your sister 'll have a tate-a-tate. But on Tuesday you must go with us to the Opera; dine and go with us, when you'll have an opportunity of making Lady Helena's acquaintance. She and Lady Caerlavrock are such *admirers* of Olivia, Mr. Marston, that you must, as you may say, reciprocate the feeling. And I hope now that you've come you'll make Olivia begin to go out a little; for, indeed, there are plenty of places where Helena would have got her invitations if she

would only have consented to go; but I've had such work to get her even to dine down-stairs with us, when we had company, and it's only to please Mary, I believe, she has agreed to go to the Opera."

Before Rupert could reply, the door opened, and Westbrook was announced. Who knew better than he the advantage of a wet Sunday? But he had not calculated on finding the visitor who was already installed in the drawing-room in Eaton-place. On the contrary, he had looked to find the ground unoccupied, and to have at least an hour of plain uninterrupted sailing, when he might put forth his most seductive arts of conversation for Olivia's benefit, with no other chorus than that of his admiring aunt and cousins. To find Rupert, of all men in the world, whom he believed to be safe in California, was particularly annoying; it seemed as if fortune were setting dead against him on all sides. First, there was Clara turning up, just when it was most detrimental to his prospects; and though he never could believe that she had betrayed herself for the sake of spiting him, yet this extraordinary friendship with Olivia, coupled with the marked coldness of the latter, gave him just cause for uneasiness. And now, here was this confounded brother appearing, at the moment of all others when he was least wanted. Julian wished him at the bottom of the sea. But, being a man of the world, he greeted him with passable cordiality; more, indeed, than Rupert took the trouble to assume in return. The latter was conscious that Julian eyed him all over, much after the manner of a man knowing in horse-flesh who examines a horse. The look was carried deliberately from the shaggy hair down to the thick balmorals, traversing a surface of loose ill-fitting gar-

ments. It was not a supercilious glance, nor an impertinent stare; it was simply a composed and careful examination of something so unusual as to be worth that trouble. And as Rupert thought of his own appearance, and compared it with Julian's irreproachable "get-up" — the plastic perfection of that coat from Poole's, the statuesque rigidity of those trousers, the waxen sleekness of that moustache, the careful carelessness of that necktie, he felt all his bile, as of old, rising against the man, which was wholly irrational.

After a few common-place sentences, and a sufficient time had passed, to prevent the move appearing too marked and sudden, Olivia said,

"Will you come into the dining-room with me, Rupert? We have a good deal yet to talk over, and Mrs. Pomfret will excuse us, as you are going on to Mr. Claxton's presently, and I shall not see you till late to-morrow."

"Good-bye," said Mrs. Pomfret. "Remember, dinner a quarter to seven on Tuesday, because we like being there at the beginning."

As the door closed upon the brother and sister, Julian flung himself back on the sofa beside his aunt, exclaiming, with a languid indifference,

"What a cad that fellow has grown! He usedn't to be so, Kate, when you were sweet on him formerly, though I never liked him — never could understand his being *her* brother."

"I don't know what you mean by my being sweet," said Kate, with flaming cheeks. "He was almost the only gentlemanlike man we ever saw at Caverton, and — and he could be very pleasant. It is very hard if a girl can't know a man without being talked of in

that ridiculous, stupid way. Of course, since then I've seen more of the world, and though I still think him a pleasant person, it's a different thing, as I have more experience of society."

Henry, who had taken up the *Observer*, and pretended to be reading, felt Kate's defence to be rather illogical. Besides, though he disliked argument with Julian, there was something cowardly in not sticking up for his friend; so he laid down the paper, and said:

"If wearing a seedy coat and a shocking bad hat makes a man a cad, Marston is one, no doubt. So would you be, Julian, if you'd been two years without a supply from Poole's, and Lincoln and Bennett. But he has the true heart and mind of a gentleman, and he is a right good fellow into the bargain, let him wear what clothes he will."

"Oh! I've no doubt of it," said Julian, examining his nails carefully, as he spoke; "only heart and mind have so little to do in society, you know. The outside crust — manner, and tact, not *only* a decent coat — are what one goes by."

"I hope he will shave his beard before Tuesday evening," said Mrs. Pomfret, shaking her head; "because I should wish him, poor young man, in his altered circumstances, to make a favourable impression; and beards *have* certainly gone out."

Down-stairs, in the gloomy dining-room, Rupert was saying, as he eyed his sister keenly,

"I hope you don't see much of that fellow? It would be enough to make me take you away from this house, at all hazards, if I thought —"

She put her hand on his arm.

"You need have no fear. I know now, Rupert, how right you were long ago. My eyes are no longer blinded about him. If he was the only man left on earth I wouldn't marry him, dear. I dislike him far more — *far* more than you do."

He looked at her for a moment in surprise. He was in no humour to question her further on the subject; he believed her, and that was enough.

"Henry Pomfret is a very different fellow," he said. "Do you know, Olivia, when I met him in Jamaica, I thought he was just the sort of man I should like you to marry? If you and he had made acquaintance when he first returned, as I hoped — however, I dare say it wouldn't have answered."

"Certainly not; we are quite unsuited, as you will understand when you see Lady Helena."

"I hope Mary Pomfret is not *improved* like Kate, eh?" he asked, after a moment or two. "If so, I'm afraid I can't admire her, Olivia. Kate has lost all her youth — grown so hard and square, and stodgy. She used to be a nice simple girl enough, and now she seems one of your regular fashionable young ladies."

"You will not find Mary the least like Kate," was all Olivia's reply.

Then she stooped down to poke the fire, and while so engaged, she said rapidly:

"I want to ask you a question, Rupert. Have you heard lately from Mr. Thompson? I know he wrote twice to you. Have you heard since?"

"No; I answered his two letters. Why do you ask?"

"Because — oh! it is too long a story to tell you

now; only Aunt Clo drove him from the house, and now that you are here, you must do your best, Rupert, to try and find him. You don't know how much I owe to him — all that he did for dear papa before he died; all he did for me, afterwards."

"I certainly hope to find him, and thank him, Olivia. He must be a fine fellow. His letters were sensible and kind, without any humbug of false modesty. And so Aunt Clo was rude to him, was she? Because he was an artist, I suppose. Very likely."

"Because she *thought* he was an artist. I have learnt quite recently, and by accident, this man's real story, Rupert. Shall I tell it you?"

And she did tell him, everything except what actually touched herself, and which it could do no good to talk of now. Indeed, knowing the jealous sensitiveness of her brother for what regarded her in such matters, the cautious, half-mistrustful tone of his letters about this very man, she felt it would be worse than useless to rouse Rupert's possible animosity against him, even if her own feelings had not been strongly averse to speaking of a love proffered and rejected.

After he was gone, she spun her girl's dream about him and Mary more industriously than ever. All women are given naturally to a little match-making. And in this case everything — except Rupert's present income and position (for his prospects seemed famous) — smiled on the scheme. He had returned ripe for falling in love, and with the recollection of the bright little school-girl whom he had left, as vivid as ever. As to Mary, there could be no doubt that, in the interval, no other image had been found to efface the

impression of the first man who had flattered her by his notice. How eagerly she questioned Olivia that evening, when the latter sat by the girl's bedside, as to all he had said, as to the stories of his foreign life which he had been telling them below, as to every little particular about him. Of course Mary's anxiety on these points was understood to arise from her interest in Olivia's brother, as such, and an old friend to boot. The thin veil was never torn aside between the two. Yet it is certain that Mary would never have plied her own sister with so many questions about Rupert Marston.

CHAPTER XV.

Before the Curtain.

ALL hope of Mary's being able to dine down-stairs with Olivia and Rupert the next day, was at an end when the doctor saw her that morning. She had a good deal of fever and was altogether in a state requiring attention and perfect quiet; he could not say whether it might "turn to anything" or not, but she was on no account to leave her bed.

It was an aggravation of the poor child's suffering to know that Olivia was enjoying Rupert's society alone, below (where she would far sooner have been than at the fine parties to which her mother and Kate were gone). The brother and sister had business to talk over, so that though both regretted little Mary's absence, the discussion of their affairs was facilitated thereby.

Rupert was in high spirits. His salary was now

doubled, and his advancement to a position of the highest trust in the house, left him no further anxiety about his future. He was for taking a small house, just large enough for Olivia and himself, somewhere in this part of London. He talked of going to an agent's about it the next day; and it was Olivia who suggested the prudence of not being in too great a hurry. She little thought how soon his ardour in the matter would cool.

Mrs. Pomfret had taken a double box on the pit tier, which enabled her to perform an advantageous act of courtesy in inviting Lady Caerlavrock and her daughter; and, moreover, to show the two families in one group to an admiring public. On that Tuesday evening, many were the glasses directed to this box. Lady Helena, whom everybody knew, sat in the front, gay and radiant, and behind her, "that good-looking fellow, and as rich as Cræsus too, whom old Caerlavrock has been sharp enough to hook." Olivia's pale handsome face, though partly hidden at the back of the box, excited a good deal of curiosity, and Lady Caerlavrock received several visits during the evening, chiefly to inquire who the girl in black was. Rupert, fresh from the hands of Mr. Trufitt, made a decidedly successful début. Olivia, perhaps, rather regretted his shagginess, and his growing to look like every one else, but she meritoriously abstained from saying this, for it was quite indefensible. Did she, in her secret heart, acknowledge that it was because some one who was never very long absent from her thoughts was so careless about his personal appearance, that she had grown to love shagginess and shabbiness, and to hate the spic-and-span look of fashionable men? Certainly

she had never liked Westbrook's ineffable air of a fine gentleman so little as when he sauntered into the box on this occasion. He took the vacant chair at the back, beside her. Beyond sat Rupert, talking to Lady Caerlavrock, who pronounced him afterwards to be "a very nice young man — so full of information." Kate had secured little Stanridge, an impoverished guardsman (who had recently begun to contemplate the possibility of sacrificing himself, "provided old Pomfret would come down handsome") to flirt with; therefore there was no hope in that quarter of Olivia's freeing herself from Westbrook. She contemplated with annoyance the prospect of his occupying this seat for the remainder of the evening; but there was nothing to be done, except to set her face resolutely towards the stage, and listen with all her might. In a lull between two of Meyerbeer's stormy choruses, he said,

"I hope you are coming out into the world a little now, Miss Marston?"

"I shall be leaving the Pomfrets shortly," she replied, and turned her head again towards the stage.

"Those are lovely white roses in your hand," he persisted, presently, leaning a little nearer to her. "Do you remember once giving me a white rose? I told you I should always keep it. I always have. It is the most precious relic I possess."

"You must have a large collection," she said, drily.

"No: what is worthless I don't keep. I keep *this* in memory of a time when you were not so cruel to me as you now are."

"Mr. Westbrook, I hate sentimentality."

"Do you call all feeling sentimentality? You would not have done so two years ago. Miss Marston, I want

to ask you a question. I hear you once lodged in the same house with Madame Stellino. She is evidently anxious that we should all see that you are intimate. May I ask, have you much reliance on her? I mean, have you implicit faith in all she tells you?"

"May *I* ask, in return, how that can possibly concern you?" and, for the first time that evening, she turned those clear lustrous eyes full upon him. He was not altogether unprepared for some such rejoinder, and yet he felt himself colouring.

"I know something of the lady, though we met as strangers the other day. Has she ever named me to you?" he looked at her askance. "Because I can't help thinking, if so, that it has been to prejudice me in your eyes. She has an old spite against me, and I have too good reason to know that she has absolutely no regard for truth."

It was a bold ingenious stroke, this, of his. He did not for an instant believe that Clara had ever committed the secret of her relations with himself to Olivia's keeping; but he believed, as he said, that she had revenged herself by poisoning Olivia's mind against him; this conviction had grown up more and more strongly in him during the last day or two; and in seizing the bull thus resolutely by the horns, he took, no doubt, a wise course. Even Olivia was, for a moment, staggered. But she quickly recovered herself. Incredible as it might seem that Westbrook should dare to talk to her about Clara in this tone, if he were a guilty man, the secret had been revealed to Olivia in too terrible an hour for her to doubt one word of that story.

She cast about in her mind what she should reply.

She could find nothing better than the simplest expression of the truth.

"I *have* heard her speak of you."

Their eyes met for a moment.

"You do not —" he began.

"Olivia," interrupted Rupert, calling across eagerly, "look opposite in the second tier — the fourth box from the stage. Surely I can't be mistaken — I never saw her but once, nearly three years ago — but that must be your friend, my little omnibus beauty."

As Olivia raised her glasses, Mrs. Pomfret, who had heard this, cried out,

"Oh! It's Madame Stellino. Yes. She is a friend of Olivia's. You've met her then, Mr. Marston? A most charming little woman, sings like a nightingale, and so very unassuming."

Rupert made no reply, but kept his glasses levelled at the box.

"Who is that with her?" asked Olivia, who was not the least curious to learn the name of the plain woman beside Clara, but hailed any means of escape from her disagreeable tête-à-tête.

Mrs. Pomfret did not know, but Lady Caerlavrock was able to supply the information. It was Mrs. Cornwallis Methuen, a lady of large and lofty connexion, and very small means. She gave musical parties in a house so diminutive that, as "the best people" for some inscrutable reason went to her, it was esteemed a high and precious privilege to be invited. She had made Madame Stellino's acquaintance at Lord Dumberly's, and would no doubt get her to sing for nothing at her next party, and make her understand it was an honour. As Mrs. Methuen was always cited as a model wife,

and her husband was a tower of the High Church party in Belgravia, and fought the battle of St. Barnabas tooth and nail, it will be seen that Clara had selected her companions with judgment. Mr. and Mrs. Methuen graciously condescended to accompany her to the opera, where they seldom could afford to go unless they were taken, and the world had the pleasing spectacle of virtuous beauty, talent, and modesty, under the shelter of a benevolent pillar of society.

Olivia had succeeded in making the conversation general, now that the first act was over. The two dowagers were agreed that it was a wonderful thing for Clara to appear in public with the Methuens; it was better than twenty lessons. Julian smiled sarcastically, but said nothing. Neither did Rupert, whose eyes scarcely wandered from the box opposite: and at this juncture the door opened, and three or four men came into the box. Of course it was the duty of those belonging to the box to make room for these visitors, and they did so.

Rupert took Pomfret's arm as they walked down the lobby.

"I say, old fellow, do you mind coming up to that little woman's box and introducing me? I want to know her. We met in an odd way years ago, and she's a great friend of Olivia's."

"You'll meet her to-morrow at dinner. I don't know those formidable-looking people she's with, and I don't think I've pluck to go up there. Besides I really scarcely know her."

"I will take you, if you like it," said Westbrook. There was an ugly smile about the corners of his mouth, but the two men alongside whom he walked, did not

see it. "I know her quite well enough to introduce you."

But not even to procure himself this, for which he was possessed by the maddest desire, would Rupert voluntarily place himself under an obligation, small though it was, to Westbrook. He had a vague repugnance moreover, which seemed to him afterwards as though it had been the shadow of things to come, against being presented to that exceedingly fair creature by the man whom he so cordially disliked.

He civilly declined Westbrook's offer, saying that as he was to make the lady's acquaintance next day, it was unnecessary to trouble him. Then, as the other two men stopped to speak to an acquaintance, he slipped down to the stalls, where, among a crowd to whom he was a stranger, he could stare up at the second tier as long as he liked without attracting observation.

Old Harrington entered the Pomfret box. After he had shaken hands all round and told them the last political "shave," a *bon-mot* of the prime minister's, and other inferior club-gossip, he sat down by Olivia.

"I wish you would not leave that seat all the evening," she said, smiling.

"Oh! If I was thirty years younger, you wouldn't say that! Ho! ho! See what it is to be an old fellow; you all think you can make pretty speeches with impunity. Why, all these young sparks will be wanting to cut my throat if I sit by you all the evening, my dear young lady, eh? Well, and so your brother's come back, I hear, and you're very happy, of course? Saw your aunt a night or two ago; she lost three rubbers, poor old lady, and was in a sad way. Ah!

by-the-by, you will be very sorry to hear that Milton has been very ill at Rome."

The old gentleman was fortunately not a very acute observer. He did not see how deadly pale she turned.

"Is he still ill? When did you hear?"

"A few days ago. He had moved on to Naples. He says he owes his recovery, he thinks, to Algy Tharpe's unremitting attention to him, night and day. Good young fellow that, very."

"Do you mean that *he* is with Mr. ——— I mean Sir Warwick Milton?"

"Why, didn't you know that, my dear young lady? He went abroad to join him. Queer fish, very, his father. He can't understand what Sir Warwick can find in his son — but I think he's gratified all the same, though he won't own it, that the lad is taken up by a man who so seldom associates with any one."

"It is strange, very strange," murmured Olivia, rather absently; she was not thinking of his last words. "I had no idea of this. I remember now the enthusiastic admiration with which young Mr. Tharpe spoke to me once about Sir Warwick Milton. I am very glad he is with him. It will do him so much good, poor young man."

"Well, you see, the benefit is mutual, if the lad has saved his life." She had thought of that long before he did. With gratitude and wonder she had recognised the strange workings of Providence in binding these two men thus strongly together; but this was a subject upon which she could not speak.

Nothing passed between Rupert and Olivia that evening. He was busy in the city all the next day,

and only appeared at half-past seven to find himself the sole occupant of the drawing-room in Eaton-place. He had been there some time — half an hour as it seemed to him in his restlessness and impatience — when he heard another cab drive up. Neither Olivia nor any of the family had appeared; the butler opened the door, and in a tone which accurately denoted the social position of the arriving guest, muttered:

“Madame St’lino.”

She came in, looking so shy, and so surpassingly lovely, that Rupert, though he had been thinking of little else all day, felt the blood rush through his veins, and his presence of mind entirely desert him for a minute or two, as he stood there looking at her. She was dressed in exquisite taste, but very quietly; some light gauzy scarf or handkerchief, I suppose affected to conceal the snow-white neck and shoulders, to which it only lent the charm of a modesty that shrunk from too overt a challenge to admiration.

She raised her bright little eyes for a moment, then, perceiving a stranger, lowered them, turned quietly aside from the part of the room where he stood, and sat down on a small high-backed chair.

Rupert had by this time recovered from a hesitation, confusion, call it what you will, so foreign to his nature. He approached her and bowed.

“I must introduce myself to you, Madame Stellino. I am Olivia Marston’s brother. I have not forgotten meeting you once, in ——”

“Oh! dear me!” she cried, putting out her little hand, “how glad I am to meet you! Dear Olivia has so often talked to me about you, and I remember you

quite, *quite* well, only you have grown darker, I think, and a little stouter, haven't you?"

It was subtle flattery, this proving to him how well he was remembered. He smiled.

"I have been abroad and only returned on Saturday. Yes, I suppose I'm burnt; and I got fat on the voyage home. I had a beard, but they made me shave before I appeared in civilised society. I was at the opera last night, and saw you."

"Ah! and how did you enjoy it?"

She meant the music, it is to be supposed. But she met an ardent gaze as she raised her eyes, and the little coquette had no difficulty in rightly applying the sense of his words.

"*Very* much. I have not enjoyed myself for a long, long time as much."

"How handsome dear Olivia looked! What a noble, grand creature she is, Mr. Marston! How proud you must be of such a sister! You can't think how kind and good she was to me when we lived in the same house. I never can repay it. I never have met with any woman towards whom I have felt as I do towards Olivia. I'm afraid she has grown not to care about me now, but nothing can ever change *me*."

"She wrote a great deal about you in all her letters to me," he began. She looked up sharply into his face, but said nothing. "You know how she has been situated of late, living, first in her aunt's house, and then here, so that she has not been able to see her own friends. You must not think her changeable. Olivia is very staunch."

"Oh, yes; she is all that is good. I feel myself such a poor unworthy creature beside her, but I love

her very much. Only I know that such a fine character as hers can hardly enter into all the weaknesses of a poor wretched little thing like myself. You are going to live together, I suppose, now?"

He was replying as Mrs. Pomfret entered. A minute or two later came Kate; and after that the plot thickened rapidly. Olivia was late. When she came down the guests were all assembled. She had only time to shake Clara's hand before they went to dinner, Rupert offering his arm to Madame Stellino, and Olivia falling to the share of some married man, who talked pleasantly enough to prevent her attention being attracted to the other end of the table. It was at Olivia's earnest request that Mrs. Pomfret had desired Julian to take down this married man's wife, and had so freed Olivia. The lady was plain, and not even amusing: Westbrook did not trouble himself to address a dozen words to her during dinner; but sat, sulky, looking every now and then across the table at Olivia, and greatly distressing his aunt by his taciturnity.

When the ladies rose and left the room, Clara linked her arm in Olivia's.

"How glad you must be to have your brother back again, dearest! He has been so very kind and pleasant. Ah, if I had only a brother — *any one* in the world to care about me! It is so lonely, Olivia, being knocked about by one's self, having no one even to scold me. Do you know I actually miss my poor cross old aunt, though she was so disagreeable at times."

"You seem to have made many friends lately," said Olivia.

"People are very kind to me — much kinder than

I deserve. Olivia, have you ever seen that man, Mr. Thompson, since those days? You know, dear, I expected you would have married him."

"So you told me. You see you were wrong."

"I'm so glad. I hope he won't ever come between us again. He is almost the only man who was ever unkind to me. I tried to make him like me, but it was no use."

"I know you tried, and it *was* no use," repeated Olivia.

Clara glanced rapidly round, and lowered her voice.

"Has *he*, Westbrook, ever named me to you, Olivia?"

"Yes, he has."

"What did he say?" she asked, eagerly.

"He wanted to find out whether you had told me anything about him. I needn't say that he learnt nothing from me."

Clara was silent for a minute or two, Olivia would have been sorely puzzled to read the little singer's thoughts at that moment. Presently the latter said:

"Your brother and you are quite like *one*, ain't you, dear? Not like a common brother and sister. How nice that must be!"

"Rupert and I are alone in the world together. We have never had anything to divide us. I pray to God we never may have!"

* * * * *

Westbrook had been playing his *cornet*, with more than usual spasm of eyebrow; and while murmurs of "So sweet!" "So very soft!" arose round her, Olivia

thought, with amazement, of the time when this performance had moved her pleasurable, when she was indifferent to the slight flatness of tone, and penetrated with a belief in the player's true and passionate feeling. It was intolerable to her now. What a relief to her ears when Clara sat down to the piano, and began Schubert's joyous, triumphant burst, "Hark! hark! the lark!" It was like a health-restoring breeze, after all those windy spasms of agony. Rupert sat close to the piano, his eyes riveted on her face. He only sighed at the end, while others crowded round with their compliments. She sang another, and another song: he never shifted his place; he scarcely spoke.

Not till the end of the evening did Westbrook contrive to get near Olivia.

"That's a pretty *tableau*, isn't it?" he said, bending over her, and turning his eyes, at the same time, in the direction of the piano. Clara had risen from her seat; she was looking up at Rupert, who stood beside her, in that pleading, infantile, caressing way which was her deadliest weapon. The expression on Rupert's face, in return, which Olivia caught as she followed the direction of Westbrook's eyes, revealed for the first time, and in a single moment, to her the presence of a terrible and unforeseen danger. Olivia turned pale, even before she heard Westbrook's laugh and his words —

"Did you ever see such a hopeless case of love at first sight, Miss Marston?"

CHAPTER XVI.

The Cloud gathers.

It was some days before Mary was allowed to come down-stairs. Those days were uneasy, if not positively anxious ones, with Olivia. After the first painful impression she had received that evening was a little worn away, she tried to think it impossible that Rupert should ever seriously fall in love with Clara. He, who had so much penetration, who was so rigid in his ideas about women, would not be likely to become captive to the fascinations of an actress. Besides (she said in her simplicity), they had few opportunities of meeting: she did not see them together for nearly a week, when they met, casually, in Mrs. Pomfret's drawing-room; Clara was the first pretty woman he had seen on his return; and he had not yet renewed his acquaintance with Mary. It was thus she comforted herself.

The morning Rupert met Clara in Mrs. Pomfret's drawing-room was the same day that Mary appeared there for the first time. She was pronounced convalescent, and had pleaded so hard to be allowed to take her singing-lesson, that Madame Stellino had been sent for. She was pale, and her pretty complexion was one of her chief beauties; she had on an unbecoming dress, Olivia feared; though she was so fond of the sweet, good little face, that, to her, it was always charming. Still she felt that Mary did not appear to advantage, just on the very occasion when, of all others, it was most important she should do so; and

Olivia was annoyed. It was contrary to all Rupert's usual habits to call thus early in Eaton-place, and he did so now, apparently, by accident. His sister forgot that Madame Stellino's coming had been discussed the evening before at dinner.

He came in as Mary was singing. Her voice faltered, and she crimsoned: at last broke down entirely. Then he came forward, and shook hands; and she laughed, and said she was so unaccustomed to sing before strangers, that she was frightened. Madame Stellino told him laughingly he must not interfere with her lesson, — that he had better go away. But Mary would not hear of this on any account. Then Olivia led him into the next drawing-room, where through the folding-door he could see and hear the lesson going on, and not distract the pupil's attention.

When the hour was over, and Clara rose and began tying her bonnet strings, Mary asked if she would not stay to luncheon? No; she had a lesson in Wilton-crescent, and was due there at one. Rupert came forward, and said that, with her permission, he would escort her so far; but she smiled and shook her head.

"That would never do. I mustn't be seen walking about with smart young gentlemen, must I, Olivia? Good-bye, dear, when are you coming to see me? I am always in at five o'clock. I have no lessons after that, and as I sing almost every night, I take my rest *then*. Mr. Marston found me two days ago — didn't you? — over a novel and a cup of tea, enjoying myself thoroughly. I was quite angry at being disturbed!"

She laughed her little musical laugh, and kissed

Olivia; put the tips of her fingers into Rupert's hand, and tripped out of the room. Rupert stayed only a few minutes longer. Somehow or other, Mary seemed to have lost her tongue: Olivia was quite provoked with her. She followed Rupert into the hall, when he was going away:

"Well?" said she, catching hold of his arm, for he looked preoccupied, and as though scarcely conscious of her having followed him down-stairs; "well, and what do you think of her?"

"Think of whom?" he asked in return, staring at his sister, vacantly.

"Why, Mary, of course — whom should I mean? You know how much I wanted you to — to — see her."

"Oh! She is a nice girl, I have no doubt."

"Don't you think she has a sweet face?"

"She isn't the least pretty."

"You think of nothing but beauty," said his sister, angrily.

"You ask me, my dear, whether I admire her. I'm sure she is a very nice girl, because you like her, but I must say I don't think much of her looks."

"If you knew her better — when you *do* come to know her, Rupert. By-the-by, when are you going into lodgings, that I may come and be with you? I think I have been here long enough now. After the wedding, next week, I shall be glad to get away."

The sister saw that her inquiry was not particularly agreeable to him, though his manner was as affectionate as usual.

"I was looking at some rooms in Sloane-street yesterday, but they would be too small to take you

in. I thought perhaps you would remain here till the Pomfrets left London; and in the mean time I could look out for something larger."

Now, Olivia, with all her faculties on the *qui vive* for detection, did not forget that Clara's lodging was in Sloane-street, nor that her brother had already, as it appeared, found his way there.

"I cannot stay with the Pomfrets so long as that," she said, decisively.

"Very well, my dear. Will you come with me to-morrow, then, and look at apartments in this neighbourhood? I am afraid we shall find them very dear, just now."

Her conscience smote her a little. And, after all, what good could she do? The obvious reply was that as long as she stayed in this house, here he would naturally come, and here he would be constantly meeting Clara; therefore, she argued, it was right that she should leave it. Within the last hour her alarms had been aroused with redoubled force; it was necessary that she should watch over Rupert; she must not leave him a prey to Clara's wiles and coquetries.

"I am not at all particular, you know," she said. "However small and humble the lodging, I shall be quite content with you, Rupert; only I feel as if I did not see enough of you here — we are scarcely ever alone together. When we have some little corner of our own, I have so many things to talk to you about. To please me, dear Rupert, you won't mind doing this, will you?"

What could he reply? He was too kind by nature, and too fond of her, moreover, to raise up any fictitious obstacles against her wish; and real obstacles, he

knew, there were none. He would fain have been free just then, master of his own time, without question or comment, and without the charge and restraint of his sister's presence. But at the root of this lay an undefined feeling, about which he had never reasoned with himself, and which, indeed, he would have found it difficult to account for satisfactorily. This was the vague impression that Olivia would be opposed to his seeing as much of Clara as he wanted. He had no ground for this; she had never spoken to him about Clara: except the doubt expressed by the latter whether Olivia's feelings were not changed towards her, there was nothing to arouse such a suspicion. But the shadow of some such suspicion did hang over his mind. He had been to see Clara three times already; and he had said nothing about it. She had openly, and very naturally, adverted to his last visit before Olivia (for why, indeed, should it be a mystery? Clara was infinitely cleverer than Rupert!), and he had felt rather awkward, in consequence, before Olivia.

With a promise to call for her the next afternoon, he left the house. He did not dine there that day; and as Mr. and Mrs. Pomfret dined out with Kate, Olivia passed the evening alone with Mary. She had hoped that Rupert would come, but he had told her he was bound to dine with the Claxtons, at Dulwich, and if he got back to town in time, he was perhaps going to a concert. As he did not say where, she did not choose to ask; but it added another touch of soreness to a mind irritated with suspicion.

Mary spoke very little all that day, and she never named Rupert. She moved about the house with less

than her usual elasticity; but then, to be sure, she was still far from strong. Her mother remarked how pale and spiritless she looked; the singing-lesson had been too much for her, perhaps? Mrs. Pomfret almost feared that she ought to have change of air. As soon as the wedding, now so close at hand, was over, she must see about it.

Soon after luncheon the next day, Rupert appeared. It was Saturday, and Henry's marriage was to take place the following Wednesday. Mrs. Pomfret, seeing Olivia ready to go out with her brother, and having an inkling of the object of this walk, suddenly cried out,

"My dear, pray stop a minute. I want to say something. I've got a great favour to ask of you. I wonder whether you'll mind doing it, very much? Mr. Marston, I don't know what you'll say to me; but the doctor has just seen Mary, and he says that she ought to have a change of air — that she won't get better as long as she remains in London. I wonder whether — whether as soon as the wedding is over, Olivia, you'd go down with her and Mr. Pomfret, for a few days, to Milton-Eyre? You see Kate has got several things for the next three weeks which she'll be dreadfully disappointed if she has to give up — so I can't go away *myself*, and poor Mary will be so lonely, all alone with her father, who has business just now in town, which will call him up almost every day, and it would be so kind of you, my dear, if you'd go and keep her company until she's well enough to return, or until we join you there, eh?"

Olivia was a good deal taken aback. To go away and leave Rupert in London just now, was the very

last thing she wished. But how could she refuse so simple a request from the people who had been so kind to her? She made a feeble effort to escape, of which she felt the futility, even as she made it.

"I will do anything for Mary; that you know, dear Mrs. Pomfret, but it seems rather hard on Rupert to — to leave him, immediately on his return, and just as I was hoping to make some little home comfortable for him."

"Nonsense, my dear Olivia," broke in her brother. "I can wait six weeks, or six months, for that matter, and you mustn't think of refusing Mrs. Pomfret on my account. I'll run down and see you whenever I can, and really you are much better out of London just now. It's getting very hot — and as you don't go into society, you'll be much happier in the country."

"I hope Mr. Marston will feel himself quite at home *here*, my dear, and come in as often as he likes — just as if you were still here; and when we all leave London next month, why perhaps he will be able to get a holiday and come down to us, eh? I'm sure we shall be very glad if you can; and then, you see, Mr. Marston, you needn't think about a lodging for yourself and Olivia till late in the summer. I think that will be a very wise arrangement, and really my dear, I shall be quite obliged to you — you will be doing me a real service if you'll go with Mary now."

Of course, after this, all further resistance was useless.

The brother and sister went out together. She asked him to take her into the park. She felt that she ought to speak to him, and she must seize this opportunity of doing so — it might not occur again; and she could

not leave London without a word of warning. But she found it harder than she thought to say what was at her heart. She knew not how to begin. Though ashamed to be influenced by such trifles, she felt the sort of day and the hour to be adverse to the frank unburthening of her heart, to the approaching a subject so difficult and delicate as that which hung like a cloud between her brother and herself. Had it been a still and pearly morning, or the quiet end of sunset, over woods and fields, she could have spoken more easily. But it was a brisk May day; a light wind drove the white piled clouds, like flocks of sheep, across the pale blue field above her head; it angered the whole surface of the Serpentine beside which they sat into scale armour of a glistering cold steel; it bustled among the elms; and when added to it was the noise of ducks, and children, and nursemaids, and the distant grind of wheels, the unquiet all around them obliged two persons, sitting on one bench to raise their voices in order to be heard.

Rupert, on the other hand, only wanted an opening, which he could not make for himself, to begin talking of Clara, and to ask his sister many questions concerning her former friend: above all, to learn, beyond doubt, what Olivia's present state of feeling towards Clara was. His frame of mind was one not uncommon under such circumstances. He was irritated at Olivia's silence on a subject which he himself shrank from approaching. Their relations, as brother and sister, had always been unusually close. Olivia had been accustomed to speak her mind, on most matters, without reserve, to Rupert; if he did so less to her, it was but natural, seeing the subjects which mostly occupied his

thoughts were not of a nature to suit or interest a girl. He had been a hard worker all these years, turning aside from paths of dangerous pleasantness with a resolute will. His hour of supreme trial was now come. Women had fastened themselves on him ere this, and he had shaken himself free of them; he had been nigh succumbing more than once to the deadly fascination of beauty, and had escaped. Would he do so now? He had lived away from women for the last two years; he had grown almost as impressionable as a boy again to the seductions of physical charms. He was becoming more and more intoxicated (he knew it himself) by Clara's fascinations. It was but a fortnight since he had first seen her at the opera: she had scarcely been out of his thoughts since then. It was more than a case of love at first sight — it was fairly a possession. When present, the influence she exercised over him he dared not own to himself; he felt helpless before it. And though, in solitude, some measure of calm reason returned to him, it was as the calmness of the shore, over which wild waves have washed, ribbing the erst smooth sand up into hillocks, and strewing it with splinters of a wreck.

He wanted, then, as I have said, to talk of her; and he was annoyed that Olivia, usually so free-spoken, would not do so. If the two sometime-friends had quarrelled, he would have preferred his sister's open abuse of Clara to this studied avoidance of her name. He did not feel as many brothers, similarly placed, would have done — indifferent as to Olivia's sentiments on the subject; quite the contrary; though, possibly, when weighed in the balance with his passion, all fraternal considerations would prove light indeed. He had not been

— nay, he could not now be — open about Clara. It was this, no doubt, that made him hesitate to begin the subject which he wanted to hear his sister discuss unreservedly.

They had walked round the park, and their conversation had consisted of a few disjointed sentences; and now they were sitting on a bench by the Serpentine, and had been so for half an hour, without the interchange of anything more interesting than a casual remark or two upon the boats before them, or the children shouting round the water's brink.

The clock of St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, struck the hour.

"That is five o'clock," said Rupert.

She looked at him, with compressed lips, guessing what was to follow.

"You promised to call on your friend, Madame Stellino, didn't you?"

"No. I made no such promise, Rupert."

"Why have you never yet been to see her?" he asked, with a sudden effort. "She feels your neglect. And now that you are living among rich people, especially, I should have thought you'd have been anxious to prevent this."

A half-pitying, half-sarcastic, smile flitted across Olivia's face, ere she replied:

"I don't think Madame Stellino attributes my not going to see her to the fact of my being in Eaton-place for a few weeks. Indeed, I think it probable that in reality she doesn't trouble her head about it. She has been taken up by a number of great people — which is much more to the purpose. I could do her no good."

"I can't say your charity is developed during the last two years, Olivia. But you women are all alike, so unjust towards each other. It seems to me that a more simple-minded, unworldly creature doesn't exist than this little Madame Stellino."

"So I supposed, my dear Rupert," she said, rather sadly.

"What do you mean by 'so you supposed'?"

"That you believed her to be all that, or you would not admire her as much as — as it seems you do."

"I *do* admire her," he replied, fired at last to speak boldly. "I can never believe that she isn't all she looks."

"Then it is useless my speaking."

"What have you got to say against her? I suppose you've had some absurd woman's quarrel?"

"We have had no quarrel. I believe Clara is even fond of me, in her way — was so once, certainly, and I can very truly say, I pity her — pity her from the bottom of my heart. The early training, the circumstances of her life have, no doubt, tended to make her what she is. Don't think I would be hard on her, Rupert. There are good points in her, and had she fallen into the hands of a good man, whom she loved, years ago, she might have been a different woman. As it is, all the bloom of truth, and fine perception of right and wrong, is rubbed away. She is a clever little creature, an accomplished actress — very little else."

"And pray, how have you arrived at this very uncharitable decision about her? What proofs have you to give that she is false and hypocritical?"

"None. I can but ask you to believe me, when I tell you that I know her better than I know any other

woman in the world; and that, alas! I have no respect for her."

"For God's sake, speak out. Don't deal in this kind of inuendo. There is nothing so hateful as stabbing in the dark."

"I can't speak out; my lips are sealed. Dear, dear Rupert," she said, tremulously, and took his hand in hers, "won't you believe me? Do you think I would speak thus, without good cause? This woman is like one of the sirens of old, luring all men who come near her to their destruction. I will not say," she added with hesitation, as Westbrook crossed her mind (and though it might detract from the force of her warning, she would not keep back one iota of the truth), "I will not say that she has not suffered cruelly at the hands of a man. She *has*, poor creature; but I fear it has only hardened her heart. Her vanity now takes its revenge on every man whom she captivates, and she has no moral delicacy of perception — absolutely none. She sees no harm in taking presents from all sorts of people ('anonymous' she used to call them) and in accepting money from — from those whom she had every reason to loath and despise. What do you say to that? Isn't that enough?"

"A woman circumstanced as she has been," he said, after a pause, "must not be judged by the ordinary rules of society. I have no doubt all this, which seems to you so shocking, could be explained satisfactorily. I ——"

"But when I tell you that she was every day coming out in some new piece of finery, and always telling me it was an anonymous gift! It is impossible you can defend or explain that away. Would you

like your wife to receive such? Ah! Rupert, if your eyes were not blinded, you would be the first to say that nothing can palliate this sort of thing. It hasn't the excuse of passion; it is —— but, oh! I can't speak about it. God knows I wouldn't be hard on her, Rupert, if I thought she had any principle. I know she has none."

He said nothing; but sat with his eyes fixed on the shimmering water before him. Three weeks ago he would have scouted an unworthy suspicion of his sister. Alas for poor human nature! his passion for another woman now made it possible for him to entertain such. He attributed all she had said to feminine jealousy; and he had not far to seek for a probable cause. This Crichton, under the guise of an artist, who now proved to be a baronet, there was no doubt had made a great impression on Olivia. Her voice, her face, her manner, when she spoke of him, all had betrayed her to Rupert; and it seemed clear, from her proud endeavour to conceal this, from the stress she laid on her *friendship* for him, that the pseudo-Thompson had himself manifested no warmer sentiment towards Olivia. But to Rupert it seemed impossible that this man should have been for months under one roof with Clara, without being enamoured of her. Was not this the clue to Olivia's soreness of feeling, to her injustice, to her perverse blindness? These two people and she had lived in the same house: some circumstance, which her jealousy had distorted, was at the bottom of this dark mystical talk about Clara. It is difficult to understand how, loving his sister and knowing her as he did, this interpretation of her conduct should have seemed possible to Rupert. The fact is, that on any other subject but this his

loyalty and his penetration alike would have forbidden it, but the glamour around this little creature had bewitched him already to that extent, that he was ready to believe anything rather than give up his faith in her.

At length he rose.

"You need have no fear for me, Olivia. I wasn't born yesterday, and have some discrimination — some perception, I hope; not to be caught so easily as you seem to think." (When was there ever a man thus boastful who was not weak about women?) "At present I can't say that I am inclined to accept your estimate of Madame Stellino as just. But I shall watch her carefully: I promise you that. And let me advise you, in return, to free your mind of any prejudice you have conceived against her. People change with circumstances: try and forget, now, any petty cause of difference that may have existed between you, and judge her in a large-minded spirit. Come with me, and call on her, in token of your forgiveness, will you?"

"I've nothing to forgive, Rupert. Clara never did me an injury. But since you wish it, let us come. Only, my brother, remember this: as you warned *me* two years ago, so, dear, I warn *you* to-day. Your warning came in time to save me from a fate which I shudder to think of. I hope mine mayn't be too late."

CHAPTER XVII.

Clara, a Model and a Shining Light.

THEY stopped at the door of a small house in Sloane-street. The maid, in answer to their inquiry, said Madame was at home, and proceeded to show them to the first floor. But the staircase was narrow; and a high-church young curate, who was coming down at the same moment, had to squeeze himself against the wall, within even smaller limits than those into which his narrow tight-buttoned garments habitually constrained him.

They found Clara in the neatest of little drawing-rooms. There was none of the stagey untidiness which had used to reign in her end of Mrs. Crosbie's room. All that was changed now. The canary twee-tweeing in the window, the open piano, and two or three bouquets on the tables, were the only points of resemblance. A pile of tickets for a charity concert, the prospectus of some Dorcas society, a dozen or more of invitations, with letters begging for Madame Stellino's invaluable assistance in aid of the funds for &c. &c., covered her writing-table. She was not sitting at her writing-table, however. She was near the window; and the workstand beside her, instead of being covered with beads and tinsel, or other materials for "vain adornment," as her deceased aunt used to call them, was covered with shreds of coloured cotton, out of which Clara was making a patchwork quilt for some old woman. She had taken off her dust-soiled, lesson-giving gown, and was in a cool white dress, which Rupert

thought ravishing. He had become dead-sick of white in the West Indies, but his taste for it revived in Sloane-street.

"How kind of you, dear Olivia, to come and see me! You have just missed Mr. Abiram — indeed, you must have met him on the stairs — such a good young man: he has been to me about his schools. He is getting up a concert, as they are in a bad way, and I promised to sing for him; and, poor young man, he is so grateful, I really thought he would never get up and go away. Talking about concerts, Mr. Marston, you never came to Saint James's Hall last night? I couldn't see you anywhere."

"I tried, but couldn't get back from Dulwich in time. When I drove up the concert was over, and you were gone."

"*Some* people would have given up their dinner, but of course I have no right to expect *you* would; have I, Olivia? And so my ticket was wasted. Well, I'm sorry I didn't give it to some one else. Dear Olivia, you look pale — are you not well?"

"Quite well, thank you. What is that you are making?"

"Oh, something for a poor old woman who is bedridden. I go about in this district sometimes, when I have a spare hour, with Mrs. Cornwallis Methuen. She is such a charming woman. You don't know her, do you? I think she said she didn't know the Pomfrets; but now that they are to be connected with the Dumberly's she supposed she should make their acquaintance. I told her how very nice the girls were — the youngest particularly. How is she, by-the-by, to-day?"

Clara's patronage of the Pomfrets irritated Olivia exceedingly.

"She is far from well. She does not recover her strength, and is going to leave London immediately after her brother's marriage, on Wednesday, so that I am afraid she will not have any more lessons of you this season."

"I am really very sorry. Not for the lessons, I needn't say, for I have more than I really know how to manage — but for the poor girl's sake. She is so nice — really almost pretty. Don't you think so, Mr. Marston?"

"Yes — no. I can't say that I do, though I'm told I ought." He glanced at Olivia as he spoke, and Clara had a shrewd suspicion of her own confirmed.

"There is no accounting for men's tastes, is there, Olivia?"

"Indeed, you may say that," she replied. "It seems very seldom that they can appreciate what is best and most worth admiring, I think."

"Yes," said Clara, with her head on one side, as she finished putting in another patch, and regarded the general effect of her work. "You know my opinion of men long ago, dear. You know that I look on them all — without exception — as selfish monsters, who are never to be depended on, who think of women and treat them like painted dolls. Ah me! Yes, Mr. Marston, I am quite in earnest. I dare say you are as bad as the rest."

"Would you condemn me unheard?" he said, smiling. "Wait till I am on my trial."

Olivia chafed and fumed under this: she regretted

now that she had come. To sit by and listen to all this angling and dangling was more than she could stand.

"Have you found a lodging yet, dear?" asked Clara, suddenly looking up. "Your brother told me you were thinking of one in this street. I hope it suits?"

"Oh dear no; and I never had any wish to come into this street. However, our lodging-hunt is stopped for the present, as I am going away."

"Going away! why, where?"

"To Milton-Eyre Abbey with Mary Pomfret; and I shall be there, at all events, until the family leaves town, I fancy; as I don't think it likely she will be strong enough to return to London gaieties. So my brother and I can't take lodgings just yet. When do you leave town?"

"Not for a long time, I'm afraid. I shall be here till the end of all things, I suppose: Mr. Abiram and I will probably be the two last souls left in the deserted city: we must console ourselves as well as we can. Ah, dear Olivia, we poor professionals have a harder life of it than you think for. When you are all having your holiday among fields, or by the sea, that dreadful treadmill of the provinces will have to begin. Bath one night, Cheltenham the next, and so on. Oh! how sick I am of it!"

"You ought to give yourself a rest, I'm sure you ought," said Rupert, earnestly. "You'll wear yourself to death, if you go on constantly at it—in this way."

"Oh, I'm very strong, am I not, Olivia? And I'm sure I oughtn't to complain, when I see other women struggling on. Every one is very good to me; much

better than I deserve. The Duchess of Battersea has offered to give me her room, if I like to have a concert, but I declined. I'm a silly little creature, I know, but I didn't feel up to all the arrangement of it. I offered to sing for any charity she liked. And then, Lord Dumberly has been so kind — so very kind! and the Cornwallis Mathuens (though of course they're poor, and never can *pay* artists) have been so extremely good in taking me, a poor friendless singer, by the hand. Her uncle, the bishop, has invited me to go there, when I'm in the north — in short, nothing can exceed their goodness. So I oughtn't to complain, ought I, Olivia?"

"No: you have no reason to complain, Clara, certainly. If you don't mind, Rupert, I think I must be going." She rose, and held her hand out — very far out — to Clara. The latter made a little pleading movement to try and get at Olivia's cheek, which maddened Rupert: how could any human being resist the tender supplication of her caress? Yet his sister never responded, never unbent one jot. "Good-bye, Clara. We are not likely to meet again before I leave London."

Rupert pressed the little widow's hands in silence: but his eyes were more eloquent than any words.

After this visit Olivia was more uneasy, and more irate with Clara, even than before. She was annoyed, too, at having had to listen to and tacitly accept Clara's assumption of her new *rôle*, as the humble and high-minded artist, given up to good works, patronised by duchesses, protected by bishops and high-church curates. All the benefit Olivia had gained, she was well aware, by this visit, was to appear, in Rupert's eyes, more

harsh and uncharitable than ever, beside Clara's saintly cheerfulness and imperturbable sweet temper. Knowing her as she did, it made Olivia sick to see this simple brother of hers bamboozled by an artful woman! Oh! if she could but reveal to him all she knew of Clara's past! If she could but show him the false wife, the neglectful mother, the heartless coquette — if she were but free to paint her whom Rupert believed to be an angel of purity in her true colours! But, for her oath's sake, she could tell him no more than she had already told. Only a case of life and death could justify the rupture of such a promise, the betrayal of such a trust. And now she must go away, and leave him to be entangled more and more hopelessly in the toils!

The wedding was a very grand business. A bishop (Clara's bishop it was), with the help of two other gentlemen, tied the knot which made Henry Pomfret and Helena Donnel man and wife. After the ceremony Lord Dumberly gave a breakfast, as Lady Caerlavrock's house was much too small for any entertainment of the sort. What with Scotch cousins and intimate friends, the guests were swelled to nigh a hundred. Rupert, as "best man," had to propose the healths of (or return thanks for, I really forget which) twelve smiling and blushing bridesmaids. And the Duchess of Battersea, who sat nearly opposite Olivia, asked, very audibly, who the young man was, because he really acquitted himself very creditably indeed. Mr. Cornwallis Methuen, who was beside her, supplied the information; and then the blood rushed into Olivia's face when he added (forgetting that the sister was within earshot):

"He is a most devoted adorer of our *protégée*, Duchess. He follows her about, wherever she goes, I

believe. She is an old friend of his sister's, and he is a most estimable religious young man — so she told me when I met him there one day — for she is so discreet, so very careful in her conduct, that she wouldn't admit any one whom she hadn't a high respect for. I couldn't help smiling, and so did *she*, at the young man's dumb admiration — quite like the devotion of a dog. I have watched him since, at two concerts. She doesn't give him the least encouragement. And, indeed, I think she can do much better for herself — really such a charming person as she is, so gifted, and so very highly principled, ought to make a good match, if she retires from public."

"It is very delightful," said the duchess, shaking her head gently, "when one finds that sort of person with good principles. And it is really quite beautiful, the way in which she is ready to devote her talents to any charitable object. And so remarkably well conducted, too. I never have seen the slightest approach to levity. It is quite pleasing to encourage so very modest and attractive a young woman. I assure you I quite take an interest in her welfare, Mr. Methuen."

"You are always so ready to befriend really deserving persons, Duchess, that I was confident you would take up Madame Stellino."

"Yes; and I quite agree in all you say about her marrying again. Being so very highly principled, there is no reason she shouldn't marry *well*; some rich old man, like Sir Richard Pytchley, for instance, who is mad about music. As to this young Mr. — what is his name? — I suppose he has not got *much*?"

"No: I inquired, and he has very little at present, but he is in the City, which I suppose means money

by-and-by, as he is very steady and industrious, I am told. Ah! the bishop is going to speak again."

Olivia did not listen to what the bishop or any one else said during the rest of the time she had to sit there. To think that Rupert should be thus discussed; that Clara should venture openly, and with a smile of compassion, to canvass him and his prospects; and, that these people should actually decide that he was not good enough for her! It made her blood boil again. She longed to let her brother know the way in which they talked of him; only that she knew it would be bootless. Rupert was of too robust a temperament not to be impervious to everything that might be thought or said, in a case where he felt strongly. He was even capable of arguing with his sister that it was very natural his worldly prospects should be discussed by Clara's friends in this manner. Olivia, whose own view of the subject was no doubt somewhat distorted by her private prejudices, while she smarted under all this twaddle, which she felt she ought to despise, knew her brother too well to imagine that he would care a brass farthing about it. While he had been speaking her eyes had sought pale little Mary among the cluster of her sister bridesmaids, all lilies and roses, at the further end of the table. Olivia had watched the delicate colour rising in the girl's cheeks, as, with eyes bent upon her plate, she listened to his speech. Of course it was jocose; usage demands that all such performances should be so, and Rupert was equal to the occasion. The eleven other bridesmaids laughed immoderately, and the rest of the room applauded and echoed the laughter. Under cover of all this noise, perhaps no one but Olivia marked that Mary did not

laugh; that only a thin, watery smile flitted over the poor child's face, in which was no joyousness. If Rupert was the cause of this, he was certainly the innocent cause — as innocent as any man could well be; yet Olivia felt that this sad little face aggravated her indignation against him. How men could be so blind! she said. How they could pass by pure gold like this, in their mad chase after worthless tinsel!

An hour later all the grand company dispersed, after seeing the bride and bridegroom fairly off, and giving them a "God-speed" on their life-journey. The Pomfrets went back to Eaton-place, where Rupert joined them. At five o'clock Mary and her father, with Olivia, were to leave for Milton-Eyre, and this was the last opportunity the latter would have of speaking to her brother, perhaps, for two or three weeks. But what was there left for her to say? Was it even wise to say anything to him on this hateful subject at present? Accident might happily open his eyes; argument, however eloquent, without facts, without *proof*, never would do so. As he stood beside her at the window, watching the luggage being put on the cabs at the door, while Mrs. Pomfret was pouring a few last injunctions into Mary's ear in another part of the room, Olivia felt that the moments were flying in which it would be possible to speak. She watched, with her fleshly eyes, the cabman and footman struggling between them to heave up a huge gown-box to the top of the cab; but her mental eyes beheld Rupert at Clara's feet. He talked to Olivia of indifferent matters; of the wedding breakfast, and the bishop's speech, but there was a constraint in his manner which was very apparent to his sister. He was clearly anxious to avoid any closer

and more personal topic, and she felt that it would be unwise to press it on him. But one thing remained: to try, by some means or other, to get him down to Milton-Eyre, away from London — away from Clara. There, in a purer atmosphere, surely the sweet and subtle charm of Mary's presence must work its effect, and counteract the poison he had lately imbibed.

"When will you come down and see us, Rupert?" she said.

"I've taken so many holidays since I arrived, I suppose I must return to steady work now."

"Sundays, at all events, you can get away."

"Well, yes; but then, you see. . . . Perhaps on Sunday week I may be able to come down."

"And you will arrange with Mr. Claxton about getting a long holiday — which you have certainly earned — when the Pomfrets leave town, and you'll accompany them to Milton-Eyre — you promise me that?"

"I will see about it. I can't actually promise."

"I think you *owe* me this, Rupert," she replied, with some warmth. "I wouldn't let you come home when you offered to do so. I have always deprecated your making any sacrifice for me. And now, when I ask of you so small a thing as that you should spend a few weeks with me at our friends' house, you hesitate."

"Well, I will come," he sighed; — "that is, if I possibly can."

"If not, I shall return to London. I can't remain there all the summer without you. Mrs. Pomfret says they are to be down in three weeks' time, at latest. Immediately she comes, there will be no further ne-

cessity for my remaining with Mary. If you can't join me, I shall return to you."

Rupert's reply was interrupted by Mrs. Pomfret coming up to say that it was time to be off. Then ensued bosom-claspings, and hand-squeezings, which could hardly have been more fervent if the young ladies had been bound for India. Rupert escorted them down to the cab, where Mary put a fluttering little hand into his; and Olivia, whose face was clouded with anxiety, let the sun shine out on it, for an instant, by showing a smile at the window, as the door was shut, and they rattled away.

He stood there, with his hands in his pockets, looking after them; then drew out his watch. It wanted a quarter of five. With eyes bent on the pavement, he turned his steps slowly in the direction of Sloane-street.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Milton-Eyre Abbey.

It was a ripe golden evening, that twelfth of June. How good the honeysuckle in the hedges smelt, after the hot day, and the sweetbriar in the cottage-gardens, as Mr. Pomfret's carriage drove through the narrow lanes: how peaceful and pleasant it all looked, after the turmoil of London, and how hard it was to believe that vice, and cruelty, and wrong were not strangers to this tranquil scene, any more than in the great seething city! There were labourers coming home from their work in the fields, and wives with bunches of rosy children, waiting at open doors to greet them, and old age, with its pipe or bit of knitting in the porch, and

sunburnt youth, in its smock-frock, staring clownishly out over the gate at "the folk a-ridin' by." Every country sight and smell was a delight to Olivia, after her long imprisonment in London. She already felt lighter-hearted, more trustful in the future; though, perhaps, she would have been ashamed to own to the effect produced by purely physical causes.

One thing, however, she was not ashamed to own to herself. Every object she beheld had a special interest for her. This was *his* country: here, from boyhood upwards, *he* had lived; he knew each tree, each turn of the road; across those fields he had often walked; he was familiar with each of those cottages, and with the names of them who dwelt there. It was astonishing the pleasure these thoughts brought to her: how they seemed to draw her nearer to him. As she passed, presently, under the old lodge gateway, it seemed like coming into the very shadow of his presence. The armorial bearings carved on the grey stone arch were his: and in the iron gate itself were wrought the letters W. M. The drive led through a wild moorland bit of park, with patches of heath, and gorse, and fern, among which a herd of Scotch cattle were feeding; and then, through another gate, into more dressed pleasure-grounds, through which the road wound, like a strait, between two seas of rhododendron, whose billows of dark blue-green were crested with a foam of dazzling lilac bloom. Above and beyond them, towered stately English trees, with, here and there, some rare Australian pine, or native of the Himalayas, strangely beautiful to home-bred eyes. And after a mile of this the house broke suddenly upon them.

It lay low, like most old places: in the winter, it

might be open to a suspicion of damp and gloom. But now, with the aureole of a June sunset round its clustered chimneys, it was a grand building, and pleasant to look upon. Of the abbey itself, only the ruins of an east window with part of its fine traceries remained. To this fragment, the present house had been added, some three hundred and fifty years back. The winds of all those winters had dashed and stained it, encrusting the grey stone with yellow lichens, and eating with cruel teeth into the mullions of the windows and carvings over the wide-mouthed porch. There was a great fish-pond before the house, where tradition made the monks of the abbey, in old time, to have spent their summer afternoons in feeding the carp; and at the back, again, a sunny, rising piece of ground, which still bore the name of the "vineyard" as relic of the same period.

A florid old man, in a white waistcoat, the incarnation of British respectability, was on the steps to receive them. This, Olivia knew, must be Sanders, an old servant of Sir Warwick's, of whom she had already heard. Though pensioned off, and having a cottage in the village, he had been loth to leave the house where he had lived for forty years, and had condescended to remain as major-domo, in Mr. Pomfret's service, for the present. Of course he looked on "the new people" with a certain contempt: how should it be otherwise? But he did his duty by them, as an honest servant. It wasn't their fault that they were not of the old stock. Olivia felt sure, at once, that Sanders and she would become friends.

They went into a great oak-paneled hall, with a vaulted roof; and all the interior of the house was of a like character; grand and ancestral-looking, and just

a thought gloomy. At least, Olivia felt that it would depend on how it was lived in, whether it were so or the reverse; there was no inherent gaiety in the long dimly-lit corridors and vast suits of rooms; she pictured to herself the last wretched Lady Milton, living in her miserable and vicious solitude here; she could not wonder at Sir Warwick's dread of returning to that most depressing old house, burthened, as it was, with terrible associations for him. Nothing but the sunlight of a happy family party could make it a cheerful home.

She did not rest till she had been through the chief rooms, examining, with especial curiosity, the pictures on the walls, as she went along; lifting her candle so as to catch a gleam of light on the cuirasses, and brocades, and powdered heads of deceased Eyres and Miltons. Mary was too tired, and too indifferent to the subject of the abbey and its ancestry, to accompany her friend; she lay coiled up in the library with a novel in her hand, but I doubt if she was really reading. Mr. Pomfret was immersed in papers at a distant table. It was then that Olivia, taking up one of the heavy silver candlesticks, opened the door of the yellow drawing-room and began her explorations.

Here Sanders, on his evening round of survey through the apartments, surprised her. Rightly conjecturing that the young lady was possessed of a laudable desire to be better instructed touching the greatness and the virtues of the puissant house of Milton, he vouchsafed to expound the portraits, at which he found her intently gazing. In the last room of all there was a comely lady in a murrey-coloured velvet, with no waist to speak of, and beautiful arms, holding by the hand a little boy, as she walked in a garden (represented

by dabs of brown and yellow paint, with an occasional spot of vermillion), beyond which an object might be detected, bearing some remote resemblance to the ruined abbey-window. But it was on the boy that Olivia's eyes were riveted. Could the grave, almost stern-looking man, whose face she knew so well, have ever been the original of this bright rosy-cheeked child? It was hard to believe; but Sanders told her it was so, and then she detected, in the merry brown eyes, some faint foreshadow of an expression which she had seen in Warwick Milton, at moments.

On the other wall, hung two more full-lengths. These, so Sanders said, represented Sir Warwick, grown to man's estate, and the late Lady Milton. They had been painted soon after their marriage, by the great Ringner, some eighteen years ago, I suppose. Allowing for any amount of flattery on the artist's part, Sir Warwick must have been a very handsome young man at that time. And yet, how infinitely Olivia preferred the worn deep-souled face she knew, with its thoughtful brow, from which the hair had receded, and on which care had furrowed two deep lines, to the white polished temples and Hyperion locks, the flashing eyes, and flesh-and-blood beauty of this youth of two-and-twenty. He looked here full of joy and hopeful promise, and — unless the artist had maligned him — just a tinge of pardonable dandyism, in the arrangement of the hands, and the careful carelessness of every detail in his dress. How much had the man's whole character changed, since such a delineation of him had been possible!

Olivia turned to the other picture with intense curiosity, and stood before it for some time. It re-

presented a young woman in a glitter of satin and lace, winding a string of pearls round an impossible arm, with fingers so taper and fragile, that they seemed liable to snap off under the weight of the beads. There was nothing to be made of the face; whatever individuality it had possessed in life had been smoothed and beautified out of it in transmission to the canvas. The mouth was about half the size of the eyes; the complexion was a fine compound of rose leaves and chalk, utterly unlike the flesh of any healthy girl, with warm blood flowing in her veins, unless indeed in the beplastered condition of a ballet-girl's. There were great coils and curls of golden hair (which recalled Clara's, and might account for Sir Warwick's repugnance to her blonde beauty), and a throat and bust which, though anatomically absurd, represented what, in real life, no doubt was of very perfect form.

Sanders seemed impatient at Olivia's remaining so long before this portrait. He walked away to emphasize his impatience. There was nothing that redounded to the credit of the house to be said of the original — why she had not even given unto it an heir! Therefore Sanders was silent; he was not one to gossip with a stranger about Sir Warwick's deceased wife.

"Lady Milton must have been very beautiful?"

"Her ladyship *was* reckoned a handsome woman, miss."

"I know Sir Warwick very well, Sanders," Olivia said after a pause, during which she had determined to make this avowal. "He has been my best friend. I know all his history, and I feel the deepest interest

in everything that concerns him. When did you hear from him last?"

"Near upon three months since; he was at Naples then, miss. I haven't heard since. I'm in hopes he may come home for a bit this summer."

"You mean come to England? He can't come *here*?"

"He has kep' the dower-house you know, miss — that is, the old Milton Manor as was, better than three miles away, just on the skirts of the park; he hasn't let that along with the rest, just because he *might* come for a bit, now and then; and being a small house, where he never lived with her ladyship, you understand, he don't mind it like this, where he can't abide to stay a night: and so he let it." The old servant sighed. "I wonder what any of the family would say if they could come down from the wall and speak, to see the old place let to strangers!"

"Why, there's no disgrace in that; and it is better than letting it be shut up, and grow damp. You will find Mr. Pomfret a very good tenant, and a very good master too, Sanders."

"Oh! as for that, I'm sure he is, miss. A better man don't exist, I'm told; only, you see, it seems strange to have any one here as master who isn't of the family. I can't reconcile myself to it yet. I didn't exactly like leaving the old place either, and Sir Warwick wished me to stop and look after things a bit, or else I shouldn't be taking service with new masters, who has been better than forty year in the fam'ly."

Having relieved his mind by this justification of his present position, Sanders was less loath to discourse of other matters.

"You lived here all the time that Sir Warwick was away, I suppose? I mean when Lady Milton was alone."

"Yes; and dreary times those were!" He shook his head, and drew in his lips, as though the talking of it put his teeth on edge. "Very dreary times, miss. He left me in a responsible position, you see. I durstn't go away for an hour; and no one ever came near the place, except it was her ladyship's father, Mr. Finchley, as used to be the surgeon in the village, till they was obliged to supervene him. It was his bad example as made —. Well, well! she's gone to her last account, and him too. He was took this spring; a merciful riddance, I'm sure. It wasn't much good to 'im, after all, his daughter being rose to be 'my lady.' She hadn't even a child, so as he could call his grandson heir to the property. And now my master 'll never marry again, I suppose; more's the pity! His second cousin's child 'll step into it all, miss, whom he doesn't even know. Well, well!"

"Sir Warwick avoids all ladies' society here, I suppose," said Olivia, after a moment's pause. She wanted to encourage the old servant to go on talking of his master.

"Yes, miss, that's it — that's just it. There be plenty of nice young ladies, among the county fam'lies, but he won't so much as look at any of 'em — scarcely so much as knows them. There's some think that he's made a vow, never to marry a lady who knows that he is rich, with a title, and a grand property. I don't know how that may be, miss, but any ways, he ain't likely to go and marry beneath him *again*; and going about calling himself Mr. Thompson, like he does,

without a valet, or anything, it stands to reason, no lady of fam'ly is likely to take up with him. No, I'm afraid he won't marry again, miss, and more's the pity."

Here Mary's voice was heard calling "Olivia," in the far distance. It was past eleven o'clock, and Mr. Pomfret was going to bed. It had been a very fatiguing day for them all, and how Olivia could go wandering through the rooms at that hour passed poor Mary's comprehension. Mr. Sanders, as was natural, conceived but a poor opinion of Miss Pomfret.

"I dare say she's a good young lady enough," he observed to the land-steward, the next morning, when the Pomfret family was under discussion, "but she ain't my style. Too weak and puling, and I can't abide light hair, after the specimen we had of it here. No, I like a fine woman. Now that Miss — what's her name? — Marston, is something *like*. She is a grand young lady. What a carriage she has, and such eyes! And then she's got some intelligence to talk, and ask about things; but the other hasn't got a word to say, but looks as white and limp as a washed handkerchief, without starch."

CHAPTER XIX.

Coming to the Point.

IN the little first-floor drawing-room in Sloane-street Clara sat alone, about six o'clock one evening in this week. At half-past seven she was to dine at the bishop's — *her* bishop, as she called him — in Bryanstone-square; but she need not begin to dress for another half hour yet. Nearly every minute in her busy day had its own active work; this was the only hour she could sit down and think, and even this was liable to the interruption of visitors. Mr. Cornwallis Methuen had only just left her, after a long and exhausting discourse upon charity-schools and Mario's Faust. She was convulsed with yawns; and, after his departure, gave orders that she should be denied to every one — except Mr. Marston. She called the maid back to say this. She was half tempted to rescind this order again, for she did not really wish to see him; but it was part of the present line of conduct which she had laid down; the time was but short wherein to reach the "point" to which that line tended, and, however she might ultimately decide to act, she could not now afford, like Titus, to lose a day. Yet she needed leisure for a little calm reflection. She did her thinking, mostly, as the Arabs pile up rings on their spear points, while at full gallop. At night she laid her sunny little head upon its pillow, and fell asleep like a child. Excitement, passion, present success, and future schemings — little, very little, ever interfered with the excellent digestion, and healthy disposition to sleep, to which,

no doubt, she was indebted for the dewy freshness of her cheeks, towards the close of a long season. At the end of each day, she lay down to rest, if not "with the answer of a good conscience towards God," at least with that deafness to any questions more sensitive natures might ask; and a self-complacency in surveying the brilliant tournament of the day — obstacles overthrown, prejudices shivered in the dust, applause and rose-wreaths on all sides, not alone from worldlings, but from bishops and holy men; briefly, a delight in the consciousness that she had won golden opinions from all sorts of people, old and young, rich and poor, which was the centre of action, the pivot upon which the whole woman turned.

Whenever she set herself to think, being an eminently practical little person, it was to some purpose; on things present, or to come, seldom on the past. She had the happy faculty of letting most by-gones *be* very completely by-gones. One topic, one person, only, she never had succeeded in effacing from her memory, as she desired. It was a pity, for the recollection disturbed the perfect working of a machinery which would otherwise have been complete and without a flaw. Yet, on reflection, perhaps I am wrong, and there *was* an inherent flaw in the metal. It was apparently the best cast iron; the soft, unsound spot was that unexpected little vein of a heart, which put out all the calculations of those who thought they read the actress through and through. I have called it unexpected, for it cropped out at times when it was least looked for; that it did not run very deep we, who have watched her after one great crisis in her life, can tell. Not enough of a heart to make her a devoted, miserable woman; not enough

to prevent her thirsting for other men's admiration, and using every art to obtain it; yet enough to make her return, again and again, to the thought of a man who no longer cared for her, and against whom she had every right to feel the deepest resentment. He had treated her heartlessly, she ought to feel the greatest contempt for him; she acted as though she did so. Yet she thought of him more than she did of any one else. Every day she found herself drawing mental comparisons between him and other men; with Rupert, for instance. In Clara's eyes, the comparison was fatal to the latter. He was a brave, honourable man; had a noble, unselfish nature; would never have acted as Julian had done; but he lacked that aristocratic beauty and bearing, that indefinable charm, dashed with superciliousness, which were so eminently attractive to Clara. Beside Julian, Rupert looked clumsy and thick-set, and all the moral qualities in the world could not make weight against the physical charms of height and strength, and an admirably proportioned figure. Hers was essentially a nature to be influenced thus; Westbrook was the only man she had ever cared for, and when she remembered the time that he was at her feet, when she thought that had she then resisted his passion she might now possibly be his wife, her heart was full of bitterness. She would have been a faithful wife to him; she could have made great sacrifices for him; and I believe if that task could have been pointed out to her, by the accomplishment of which she might have won back his love, she would have journeyed to the world's end to achieve it. She had gloried in her triumphs lately when she and Julian had met; it had been sweet to her to show that others could appreciate

her, if he could not; to parade before him her intimacy with that woman to whom her sharp eyes at once saw that he had transferred his allegiance. She acted the part of oblivion and indifference like an accomplished actress, as she was; and if she did not altogether succeed in imposing upon Westbrook, it was rather that he believed in her deadly animosity, than that he suspected her of the folly of any lingering fondness for himself. He was profoundly incredulous as to her capacity of caring for anything in heaven or earth, except her own little self. It had been a case of "diamond cut diamond," and all was at an end long ago between them. Her crossing his path at this juncture was a great bore; it might even seriously interfere with his prospects. He was, therefore, most anxious to discredit her in Olivia's eyes, by proving to the latter what an *intrigante* Clara was. It was on this account that he had found a peculiar and malicious pleasure in pointing out the toils which she was evidently spreading for Rupert. Each time they met he watched Marston's entanglement becoming more and more hopeless, and he smiled. He knew quite well that she cared nothing about the young man; it all tended to confirm his convictions touching her, and, inasmuch as he saw that Olivia's suspicions against her quondam friend were roused, Julian was well pleased. Certainly this was not the result Clara desired to bring about; so far she had failed. And she knew it, yet she had not quite lost all hope. It might be yet possible to arouse his vanity and excite his jealous love of success, by the knowledge of other men's devotion. So she thought; but yet, she was far too practical to allow a chimera to stand between her and the prospect of worldly

advancement, ease, and comfort. A marriage with Rupert Marston in his present circumstances would, perhaps, scarcely seem to present this prospect, but he was a rising man, was sure to be a rich one some day; in Clara's position, such a marriage was not to be despised. And among the motives which actuated her in encouraging Rupert may perhaps have been the feminine triumph of winning Olivia's brother, in spite of the warnings which (Clara's unerring instinct detected) were employed against her. She had been anxious, however, not to alarm Olivia, if possible, and, before her, had always treated Rupert's admiration as a matter of course — a species of homage to which she was too much used to treat it as of any special importance. She talked quite openly, as we have seen, of his visits; referred playfully to his absence at a concert where she expected him; was careful that there should seem to be nothing like concealment on her part; in short, that Olivia should understand it was a harmless flirtation of her brother's, which she, Clara, a little out of pity, and a little out of her friendship for the sister, would not too coldly and cruelly nip in the bud. It would have been enough for Olivia that she knew her quondam friend by this time, to prevent her taking this view of the case: but she also knew her brother. Only once before, in the first flush of youth, had she ever seen him so engrossed by any woman, and she knew that *that* had not been a light matter, without importance or result. It had changed the whole current of Rupert's life; and now that, after eighteen months' exile, he had returned with renewed freshness to civilised society, the impression which another woman had produced was not likely to be fleeting. So Clara

reckoned too hastily that, by her artifices, Olivia's suspicions would be allayed. She felt the iciness of Olivia's manner, indeed; but then, ever since the renewal of their intercourse, Olivia had been cold with her. And she had been less and less able to fight against it — to struggle back to the old footing of intimacy: it was not to be. There was one bond between them, a secret which Clara had no fear that Olivia would reveal, even to Rupert; but it was as a chain uniting two dead bodies, and Clara knew this. All the vitality of her own friendship for Olivia was extinct, though she would fain have galvanised the cold remains into the semblance of life. The hectic existence of what had never been a very natural affinity, had received its *coup de grâce* with the needle point of jealousy. She could not forgive her Westbrook's admiration. It was enough that he should be utterly callous to herself, that he should remain perfectly unmoved by her presence; that, over and above this, he should lay his perjured vows at Olivia's feet irritated her when she thought of it. I have used the needle's prick advisedly to indicate her wound: it was no gaping deadly hurt, but rather the sharp little sting which angers, while we, at the same time, feel it to be scarcely worth our serious notice. For she was far too acute not to be perfectly certain that Westbrook's love for Olivia would never be successful. Still, the venom of outraged vanity rankled in those needle pricks: and a desire for retaliation added another motive to her artful encouragement of Rupert's passion.

This had been the condition of Clara's mind during the past three weeks. The question she had to answer now to herself was, whether she was prepared to

marry Rupert, for whom she did not care a rush. Was there any higher prize for her ambition within reach? She had a number of warm admirers, like Lord Dumberly, who buzzed round her every evening, and would have been content to have buzzed round her all day long, for that matter, if she had allowed them. Would any one of them marry her? Could she bring back Julian to her feet by the spectacle of her triumph over a greater than he? Knowing the man, I believe she thought this not impossible; and for him she would have given up even young Islington, the future Duke of Battersea, himself. Could she bring any of that set to the sticking-point? They would one and all, doubtless, have made her liberal offers of a certain kind; but no one will imagine, I hope, that Clara was likely ever to accept such. The days were past, even, when she levied a species of black-mail on her adorers, and accepted the "too, too solid" incense offered upon her altar. No; she had now risen above that sort of thing; the necessity, born of vanity, and her straightened means, no longer existed; her income, if precarious, was at least sufficient for her daily wants; and she had soared into a region of bishops and curates, where charity and modesty, and virginal simplicity seemed likely to be more profitable than all those outward and visible arts, to which, in a lower condition of coquetry, she had pertinaciously clung.

She had argued the matter backwards and forwards frequently of late; nor could she make up her mind how she would eventually act. She could only make up her mind to this, that she would spare no pains to hook her trout: whether she would land him must depend on circumstances; but once hooked, she could

play him to advantage. Olivia's absence this last ten days had been a great gain; still the time was short, the season was drawing to a close; the trout, though foolish and infatuated enough, heaven knows, had done no more than nibble at the bait. In other words, he had not yet asked her to be his wife.

At twenty minutes past six there was a hurried knock at the door. She smiled to herself, and glanced at the clock on the chimney-piece.

"I must go and dress in ten minutes. There is hardly time for him to come to the point."

Mr. Marston was announced. He entered and came up to her arm-chair in the window, with an expression of quiet pleasure in his face, which it was impossible to translate wrongly. He was looking into the eyes of a woman whom he passionately loved. He held her hand — she let it linger in his — for a moment or two: then she said:

"This is kind. I hardly expected you so late."

"Mrs. Pomfret made me go with her to the Royal Academy. I was dreadfully disgusted, but I couldn't refuse. She has been so kind to Olivia. By-the-by, have you had a note?"

"No: what about? And who from?"

"You know that they go to Milton-Eyre next week, and that I am to go with them?"

"Ah, yes: so I think you said."

"I'd much rather remain here, but I can't get out of it. I promised Olivia I would."

"Pray, why *should* you get out of it, Mr. Marston?"

"Oh! never mind, if you can't guess."

"Well, but about my note? You haven't told me who it's from?"

"I forgot. That note will set all straight, if you will only answer it as I trust you will — as you must, indeed. Mrs. Pomfret wants you to come also to Milton-Eyre."

She looked down at her pretty hands, to veil the sparkle of unexpected gratification in her eyes.

"I? Well, I don't know: it requires a little reflection. I have engagements which may, I think, interfere. I should like it; but, in my position, there are so many things to be considered — whether it is *prudent* — what the world may say — ah! so much to be considered! It would be very pleasant being with dear Olivia. Not that I think Olivia would like my coming: do you, Mr. Marston?"

He flushed, and looked annoyed.

"Why not? Why shouldn't she be glad to see an old friend?"

"Because, alas! dear Mr. Marston, she no longer looks upon me as an old friend. You must know this yourself. Indeed, if you are honest, you will confess that she has tried to prejudice you against me. I'm sure I don't know what I have done. I have never admired, never loved any woman as much as Olivia; and she used to be so different!"

"If my sister has conceived any false impressions of you, Madame Stellino, it is additionally necessary that you should not shun her; that you should disabuse her mind on the contrary. Women are apt to form erroneous ideas of each other. But at Milton-Eyre she will learn to know you better; to see you again with the same eyes she used formerly. I am sure of it."

"Ah! no; I see further than you do. There is a

reason" — she appeared to hesitate — "a reason why it is certainly better that I should not go."

"And that is —?"

"Cannot you guess, Mr. Marston? I am sure you can. You know very well to what I allude?"

"Indeed, I don't. I haven't an idea what you mean."

"Well, if you oblige me to speak out, I must do so, because I have too great a friendship for both Olivia and you to wish to be a cause of misunderstanding between you. You are very kind to notice a poor little singer like me, and I am duly grateful; but it should not, it *must* not, interfere with your duty elsewhere — with those attentions which are looked for and expected in other quarters, where you are bound, by interest, as well as gratitude, to pay them."

"What on earth do you mean? Where are my attentions looked for? and what debt of gratitude do I owe? You are under some strange delusion."

"Ah! no. You cannot think that I am blind to dear Olivia's wishes as regards you and that sweet girl, Mary, who will have thirty thousand pounds, and is, I am sure, very fond of you — very. I know that is at the bottom of Olivia's sudden dislike to poor me. As if I could *really* stand in her way for a moment! But, in my position, it is far better that no one should be able to talk nonsense, to imagine foolish, impossible things, about you and me. You see how frank I am, dear Mr. Marston. You will forgive me, won't you? But you see now how far better it is that I should not go to Milton-Eyre."

Rupert looked fixedly at the roses on the carpet, and tried to decapitate them with his cane.

"You are entirely mistaken — it is quite a delusion about Mary Pomfret. That never has been a question of anything at all between us. It is impossible that my attentions can be 'looked for' there, or that Olivia can have any idea of the sort. Why, I haven't seen her half a dozen times since I returned, and she was a child when I knew her two years ago. As to her money, I hope you don't believe *that* would influence me, Madame Stellino."

"I thought all men married for money," she replied, with a smile, and glanced at the clock. Five minutes were gone.

"To me, at all events, it would be an obstacle," he said, quickly; and, leaning forward, brought his passionate black eyes yet nearer to hers. "If I ever marry, it must be a woman I love, and who loves me well enough to make sacrifices for me. I am poor, and for years she will have to struggle on with but a slender income. But, for my part, I had rather this than that she brought me all the mines of Golconda."

"That is very noble, very disinterested," murmured Clara, looking down. "I am sure very few young men of the world share your sentiments on the subject."

"I should spurn to be indebted to my wife for the luxuries of life; its necessities I hope she would never want. Perhaps few women — brilliant, admired, with the world to choose from — would consent to such a lot. I know this: but I also know that if ever such a woman *does* consent, it will be because she feels the strength and truth of my love, and that she can, in some smaller measure, return it."

Two minutes of the five were gone.

"Miss Pomfret's fortune can be settled on herself. You will find her all you can desire, and make her very happy, and be very happy yourself too, I am sure."

"Nonsense. Don't talk about her in that way. You must see — you must *know*" — here he took one of the little hands that lay close to his between both his own — "that there is but one woman in the world who can make me happy; that I worship the ground on which she stands; and that if, in time — I would not hurry her to a decision *now* — but in time, when she gets to know me better, if I can induce her to unite her lot with mine, to renounce her brilliant career for my obscure one — if she can ever learn to love me enough to make this sacrifice — I shall be the happiest man alive. All the rest of the world may go to the deuce."

"Fie, Mr. Marston! And Olivia — have you forgotten her? Even supposing this person should ever learn to — to — to see, in short, that it is for her happiness as well as yours, that she should decide as you wish, would she be justified in estranging you from your dear sister? *She* would never hear of such a marriage, you know."

"Olivia will be reconciled to my choice when she knows it is irrevocable; rest assured of that. She is the best and noblest girl possible, at heart. Contact with snobbism may have spoilt her a little, for the moment, perhaps; she may attach undue importance to social position; but all that will pass away. Hers is too fine a nature, and she is too much attached to me to let such miserable considerations interfere with my happiness."

She shook her head with a sigh.

"Do not lay the flattering unction to your soul. You will have to choose between the two. Olivia will never be reconciled. If you spoke the truth, you would confess that she has warned you against me? Now, hasn't she?"

Rupert coloured, and hesitated.

"Won't you tell me what she said? I shan't mind, you know. It won't alter my affection for her. I know she is under some hallucination about me."

"She has only spoken in the vaguest manner, as thinking you are not calculated for — for — domestic life. Perhaps some little prejudice may exist in her mind because she fancies you received presents from anonymous admirers, when you used to act. There was no more serious charge than this, I can assure you."

"One man may steal a horse, while another mayn't look over a hedge," she said, shaking her head, but smiling.

"What do you mean?"

"That dear Olivia received plenty of presents herself, worth far more than any *I* ever had, and hers were *not* anonymous; so she might have returned them. But of course, what is shocking in a poor actress is admissible for a young lady in Olivia's position. How just the world is!"

"But you're surely mistaken. Who did Olivia ever have presents from?"

"From Mr. Thompson, the painter."

Rupert said no more. He did not, for an instant, believe this; he knew his sister too well; but it confirmed his conviction that there had been a jealousy

between the two women touching the painter. It seemed almost as though in answer to his thought, when Clara said,

"I'm sure she might receive as many as she liked for all *I* cared. But dear Olivia is prejudiced against me. Depend on it, I am right. She would never be reconciled to this."

"You don't know my sister as well as I do," he said, with a confident smile; then added, with inexpressible tenderness, "and now, will you not promise to come to Milton-Eyre? Will you not give me the chance of teaching 'that person,' if possible, day by day, how to love me? In fine, will you learn to see that you are mistaken about Olivia, and that there is nothing but a transient cloud between you, which my unalterable devotion shall very certainly disperse?"

She rose, with a lovely radiant look, and gave him her hand: he raised it to his burning lips.

"I must send you away. It is time for me to dress for dinner," she said. "Yes, I will come to Milton-Eyre; that is, if my bishop will allow me, and the dear, kind Cornwallis Methuens, who take so much interest in all my plans. How good they all are to me! and you, too, Mr. Marston. What have I done to deserve it?"

With a little friendly smile, and nod of the head, she gave him his dismissal, and rang the bell for her maid.

Nothing could be more satisfactory. She had brought him to "the point." After such words as these, no man could honourably withdraw from the position in which he had placed himself; while she, on her part, stood committed to nothing: free to take or to leave, as, in the fulness of time, she should see fit.

CHAPTER XX.

The Manor-House Garden.

SOME days passed: Olivia's dread about her brother, if not forgotten, was at least mellowed by distance, and by sundry small circumstances. She spoke comfortable words to her own thoughts when they reverted to the subject. In most of Mrs. Pomfret's daily notes there was mention of Rupert, and none of Clara. It did not appear that the latter had been to Eaton-place since Mary had discontinued her lessons: Rupert was there very often. He himself wrote to his sister, and did not name Clara, while he spoke of soon joining Olivia at the Abbey, for he had obtained his holiday. He was to accompany Mrs. Pomfret, who had settled now on leaving London in a fortnight; so this excuse which he pleaded for not coming down on the Sunday, as he had promised, was plausible enough. Altogether, Olivia was easier in her mind; though, perhaps, the chief cause of her abated anxiety was to be found in the invigorating country air, in the diversion of her thoughts into other channels, in the strong interest she took in everything around her. When hope, and health, and a power of enjoyment in all God's works are strong within us, we face our dangers and difficulties in a wonderfully brave spirit, or we put them further away from us; and so at least they do not swallow up our very lives.

Mary Pomfret's spirits did not revive like Olivia's; but the rosebuds began to show in her cheeks, and they blew more and more every day. She enjoyed

the sweet June weather, in the companionship of her friend, as much as she could enjoy anything just then. She was suffering what many a young girl has to suffer. Absence, and the resolution to conquer a foolish fancy, would in a few months, probably, have succeeded in restoring her to something very like her old self; only with deeper thoughts, and more of insight into life. But this was not to be.

The two girls sat out almost all day in the new-mown hay. Each took her book, and read or pretended to read, for they did not talk much. How could Olivia speak of the conflict of hopes and fears within her breast to the young girl at her side? Still less could Mary talk to Olivia (of all women in the world) about her secret grief, poor child. Therefore, when they spoke, it was of some cloud-shadow moving, like soft purple wings, across the distant hills — of the summer wind, sighing among ruddy branches of the gaunt Scotch firs — of the dog-roses in the hedges, and the lilies on the pond — of all external objects, and of nothing that lay far down and out of sight.

In the hall hung an old chart of the county, which Olivia one day studied for some time. Upon it, adjoining the vast green tract which bore, at that date, the name of *Eyre Abbey*, was marked a small enclosure to the north-east. This was Milton Manor. Some hundred and twenty years back, its owner had married the heiress of Eyre Abbey, when the estates became one property, as the compound of "Milton-Eyre" attested. Olivia, by dint of much reflection, established in her own mind the relative geographical position of the two houses. Her desire to visit the old Manor, the cradle of the Miltons, the home of Sir Warwick, when-

ever he should be in England, was strong. Up through the "vineyard" at the back of the Abbey, and along a path which led over the wooded hill, where neither of the girls had yet wandered, was the road which Olivia knew must lead to the Manor, and which she resolved to follow some day.

The right moment came, one afternoon, when they had been at the Abbey about ten days. Mr. Pomfret had gone early to town. The young ladies had their luncheon alone, without even the stately supervision of Sanders, who had not been seen since breakfast, and was believed to have gone to the village and to be in the bosom of his family. Olivia proposed that they should take a longer walk than they had yet done: she mentioned her desire to see the Manor. About four o'clock the girls took their garden-hats and sketch-books, and strolled up the hill, under the cool green shade of woods. Over the brow, and down the other side, for more than two miles, the path wound on, until they came to a small wicket dividing the estates. It stood open, and they did not hesitate to pass through. A few yards further on, the low gables and clustered chimneys of an old red-brick house rose up from the midst of clipped yew hedges. A light fence separated the wild wood path from this quaint garden.

"Have we any business here?" said Mary, stopping short as they neared the garden-gate. It was ajar, and they looked through to a rich mosaic of flowers—common, old-fashioned flowers, but none the less sweet or brilliant for that, set in gravel, with high box borders, and relieved by long smooth passages of turf. To right and left of the gate was a long covered walk (*charmille* in old French), of thick and close-clipped

yew; an impenetrable shelter from the sun on such a day, having round windows, at distances, cut out of the solid verdure, and no chance for the sun to get in from overhead. It looked so cool and pleasant; besides, the house which Olivia came expressly to see was partially hidden from where they stood at the gate. The temptation was too strong.

"It is uninhabited. There can be no harm in our going in. We can walk down this *charmille*, from which we can see the house better."

She pushed open the gate, and Mary, with some misgiving, followed her. Half-way down the covered walk they found a stone bench, opposite one of the peep-holes I have named. Mary said she was tired, and would go no further; nor, indeed, was there any excuse for their doing so; the house, embowered in clematis and Virginian creeper, but with no other special beauty about it, save that of age, which has always a charm, stood plainly disclosed. There was the garden porch, and the sun-dial in front, with great bunches of lavender around it, and a balustrade dividing the terrace from the garden, whereon a couple of old white peacocks were perched. They could see it all; and, to Olivia's surprise, most of the windows of the house were open.

"Oh!" cried Mary, suddenly, under her breath, "look there!"

Olivia started up, and leant forward. A half inarticulate cry escaped her. She sat down without a word. Sir Warwick Milton, with Sanders at his side, stood within a few yards of her.

"Come away, quickly; we ought not to be here," whispered Mary. Olivia made no reply; she scarcely

heard her: there was a singing in her ears, and her heart beat so fast that it seemed literally to be choking her; she could not have moved to save her life. Mary made one more fruitless effort to get her companion away: possibly the low murmur of her voice reached Sir Warwick; he turned sharply towards the *charmille*, and entered it by an archway, a stone's throw from where the two girls sat.

A smile lit up the sombre face, but he did not seem surprised to see her. Except for the thirsty way in which his eyes fastened upon her, and drank in every little change that the months might have made in her face and figure, one might have thought that they had parted yesterday.

She took the hand he held out, and murmured something — she scarcely knew what. Mary stared, wonder-stricken. It was Sir Warwick who first became conscious of a forgotten ceremony.

"Miss Pomfret, I presume? Miss Marston and I are old friends, but she has not yet known me under my true name. I must introduce myself to you both, as the owner of this old house, where I am glad to welcome you. I only arrived from abroad early this morning, and I meant to call on Mr. Pomfret by-and-by."

"My father is in London," said Mary, shyly.

"So Sanders told me; but that he would be back late in the afternoon. Now that you are here, will you not come in and see the old Manor House? It is a curious place, and I should be glad to show it you."

He addressed both the girls; but it was now Olivia who replied, not without a certain hesitation,

"It is too late, thank you. Mr. Pomfret may come back — we must be turning home."

"In that case, you must let me escort you. If Mr. Pomfret is returned, I can pay my respects to him."

They wandered slowly back through the firwood, talking of indifferent matter, and naturally keeping very clear of all that lay nearest the heart of either. He asked, with a smile, after his old friend Miss Pringle, and inquired a great deal about Rupert. He told of his own journeyings with Algy, and spoke with paternal affection of that honest-hearted youth, who had now returned to the far less paternal bosom of his father. Mary took no part in the conversation: she walked on, and listened in silence, pondering over the strange fact that Olivia should have kept her intimacy with the owner of Milton-Eyre such a profound secret.

When they reached a narrow walk in the vineyard, and were but a stone's throw from the house, Mary, who was walking in front, said she would go forward, and see if her father were returned. The two who walked alongside each other, gradually, imperceptibly, slackened their pace.

"And so you are not married, Miss Marston?"

There was a tumult in Olivia's breast, which made it hard for her to reply quite naturally,

"Did you think I was?"

"Yes — no — that is, until lately, I thought it likely. You know what you once said to me."

She looked up into his face. After a moment's pause, she replied in a low voice,

"What I said to you was the truth."

"Then, naturally, when your aunt gave me to understand —"

"What my aunt said was *not* the truth. I guess what it was. Oh, Mr. Thomp—, I beg your pardon, Sir

Warwick, how could you believe her? How could you act as you did, solely in consequence of any words *she* said?"

"Why, those words confirmed what I already partly knew from your own lips. But, besides that, I thought there was some show of reason in what the old lady said, that my presence only tended to keep up the morbid condition of your mind by memories of the past; I saw you were restless and miserable, and I felt the uselessness of remaining, when I could be no longer of any use, and when there was another at hand, whose privilege it was to minister to your wishes, and help you with his counsels."

The tears stood in Olivia's eyes. She shook her head.

"There was no such person. I was alone, and very friendless, all those months, while you would not answer my letters. Ah! you never will know what I suffered in that house, until these good Pomfrets came, and took me away."

He paused, for a moment, in the narrow path, and seemed hesitating what he should say. He looked away from her, and tore a long trail of convolvulus down from a rose-bough overhead.

"Forgive me, if I probe too far; but have you not seen again the person of whom you once spoke? — the person to whom your aunt referred, who had turned out worthier than you believed him? Perhaps I have no right to ask the question; and yet I have come all the way from Naples to ask this, or something like it."

She coloured: but a little smile played round the corners of her mouth. She had not then been self-deceived.

"You have my leave to ask any question you like.

As to that person, I *have* seen him. I wish I had not. I wish I could think I were never to see him again. I look back with wonder at myself when I remember how differently I thought once. My feeling — what for a moment I fancied was love — was like this, I think:” she touched the white blossom, with its graceful tendrils, which he swung, censer-wise, in the air, as he walked along — “It looks fair for a moment, but it is only a noxious weed, clinging to anything, and its life is but an hour. I was an ignorant and very enthusiastic girl — that is the whole truth. I made something like a hero for myself of almost the first man I had ever known. I soon learnt to know him and my own heart better.”

“And what is your plan of life now?” he asked, gently, after a pause. “You are not going to live entirely with these friends, I suppose. Is your brother likely to marry?”

She turned quickly round.

“Why do you ask? I earnestly hope not.”

“Because I was reflecting that, in that case, you would be homeless again.”

“Oh,” said Olivia, with a touch of her old pride, “I hope I shall not be dependent on the pity of my friends, if that *should*, unfortunately, come to pass. I mean, if — if my brother should marry any one I don’t like.”

She said no more, for Mary and her father drew near. But, in her own heart, she asked, “Why does he always return to the old ground? Is it only out of pity, then, that he comes back?” She had been so happy during all that walk — so doubly happy but a

minute before. Now, again, the sky seemed overclouded.

Mr. Pomfret greeted his landlord very courteously, and invited him to stay to dinner. They all sauntered back to the house together; but there came a gloom over Sir Warwick's face as they approached it. Olivia, who noticed this, well understood what the first sight of that home, fraught with so many bitter memories, must be to him, after many months' absence. But her attention was diverted to what Mr. Pomfret was saying to Mary.

"Yes, I saw your mother for a moment, my dear; and she and Kate come down by the last train to-morrow. Your brother doesn't come till Saturday, Miss Marston, when it appears they've invited quite a party. Lady Caerlavrock and Lord Dumberly, and Julian, and the little Madame Stellino, who's to give you lessons, Mary, and will sing in the evening, and amuse the company."

Olivia shivered, as though a cold wind had swept by her. Her fears were being fulfilled. In spite of her present state of excitement on a subject which touched her yet more nearly, her thoughts flew back, with a feeling of intense anguish, to Rupert. She shot a rapid glance towards Mary. The girl was pale; but walked on, looking straight before her.

CHAPTER XXI.

In the Moonlight.

IN the evening, while the two gentlemen sat and talked "across the walnuts and the wine," discussing farms, and the relative merits of tenants whom Sir Warwick had known since he was a boy, this is what passed between the girls. They sat at the open window, in the library, opposite which the moon was rising over the black ridge of yew trees, and silvering the edges of the fish-pond, among the water-weeds.

"So in three days more, our quiet life here comes to an end, Mary, and we shall have a house full of gay company."

"I am very sorry — I had much rather no one was coming."

"But your singing lessons — you'll be glad to go on with them now you are stronger?"

"I think I have lost all taste for singing. I have not opened the piano since I came here..... You have known Madame Stellino a long time, Olivia — are you fond of her?"

It was the first time since Rupert's return that the little singer's name had ever been mentioned between them.

"No, dear Mary, I am not; she is a woman I have every reason to mistrust. I am very, *very* sorry she is coming here."

"I thought her so charming and simple at first; I suppose because she is a great actress. But somehow or other, lately, I have changed. Without any reason

that I know of, I have got to think as you do, I believe. Why did mamma ask her here?"

"I suppose to be agreeable to some of her visitors," Olivia replied, quickly. Then she tried to give her words a general interpretation by adding, "Lord Dumberly, you know, is very fond of her singing."

After that the conversation dropped; and when Mary spoke again, it was to ask Olivia touching her acquaintance with Sir Warwick, and how it came to pass she had never named it.

"I knew him under very different circumstances, and passing under another name. I only, indeed, quite lately discovered my friend's identity with the owner of this place. As he had always kept the secret from me, and I had no reason to suppose that, even now, he wished me to know it, I didn't feel myself justified in speaking about it. That is the whole truth, dear Mary."

When the two men came in, Mary made tea; and her father, as he often did, after a hard day in town in this hot weather, fell asleep. Olivia remained in the window-seat, in the quiet moonlight, with the sweet odours of jasmine and honey-suckle borne in upon the dewy air; and here Sir Warwick joined her. Mary, with a woman's instinct, when her tea-making was done, took her work to a distant table, where the lamp stood. Cross-stitch was not to be done by moonlight.

He stood silently, for some minutes, looking upon the silvered water, across the stone terrace, and the steps, and the balustrade, crowned with vases of flowers, clear lit in the sharp moonlight. At last, he said, in a low voice which travelled no further than the embrasure of the window,

"Do you like this? It looks to you peaceful and pleasant, I suppose? To me it is quite the reverse: full of harsh memories. How many moonlight nights have I stood here alone! and — you know something of my past now. You know why this house is so intolerable to me. If it had not been for you, I could not have brought myself to enter these doors so soon again. I had made up my mind whenever I was in England, never to come near it."

"I am glad you have broken through that resolution," she replied, quietly. "It would be a pity if this grand old place should know its master's face no longer. To me, it seems the very perfection of an English ancestral home. How strange it is to remember you shut up, day after day, in those little lodgings by the river!"

"Some of those days were the happiest I have ever known. You can understand now why it was a relief to me to cast off every association with my miserable past. I wanted —" here he paused and hesitated a little — "I wished very much to have told your father who I was. I did not see, however, that it would do any good. I think he liked me; I think he would have trusted you to me; and I always shrank, with the dread of a terrible experience, from allowing my social position to be thrown into the balance in my favour. With your father's peculiar character, too, I felt that it would be hard to make him understand *why* I liked living incognito. He would have thought it romantic stuff — eminently 'unpractical.' Am I not right?"

"He was very fond of you," she murmured: but she was almost inarticulate.

"I should have suffered in his estimation, however, as a sensible man. Then, Olivia, as I grew to know you better, day by day, and to form, in spite of myself, wild hopes about you, I clung more than ever to the idea of keeping you in ignorance of my name. It was a foolish fancy, for God knows I was very certain it would make no difference to you; but I had registered a sort of half vow on the subject long ago. And now tell me if I am deceiving myself, or whether you can care for a man twice your own age enough to marry him? A hope has begun to rise in me: some words you let fall to-day seemed half to confirm it. I think you know that I love you very dearly." He had got her hand in both of his. "If I am mistaken, you will put me out of my suspense at once: but for God's sake don't let us deceive each other by pride, or any other foolish fancy. You said something of 'pity' to-day. If it be possible that you ever believed that to be my feeling, at least you know better now. I tell you the simple truth when I say that I love you far better than anything I have ever loved in the whole world."

The tears were raining over her cheeks, but she looked up through them into his face, with the brightest smile. She laid her other hand in his; he wanted no other answer. They were both perfectly happy in that silence for some time, her head leaning against his shoulder, as they sat there in the moonlight; the only sound, an occasional snore from Mr. Pomfret's distant arm chair. "And your vow?" Olivia whispered. "I thought you would never marry any who didn't take you as an unknown painter? You know I refused to be your wife, then. Are you quite sure that it is not

because of your broad lands and your old name that I want to be your wife now?"

He looked into her eyes with that candid trustful look which said far more than his actual words.

"I shall keep to the strict letter of my vow, because I believe, because I *know* now, that you did take me — in your heart — while you as yet only knew me as the obscure painter." He fell into her playful tone — for where the heart is full this is no uncommon outlet — as he continued, "Then, by a fine piece of casuistry, I can truly say, you have not seen my home, which is now the little old Manor House, and will be, for some years to come. You know you refused to come in to-day. Was it out of regard to my conscience?"

She shook her head, laughing through the tears she wiped away. "What will Sanders say? Ah! I begin to wish you could have played the Lord of Burghley, as you intended, to the end. People, of course, will say that I ——— but oh, I am so happy, I care very little what anybody thinks or says now."

She leant her head again upon his shoulder, and for upwards of an hour Mary could just catch a low continuous murmur from the deep embrasure of the window. It was interrupted by Mr. Pomfret's starting up, with a snort, and demanding the hour. It was past eleven, and Sir Warwick saw the propriety of at once bidding the party good night.

As the girls were going up to bed, Olivia threw her arms round Mary's neck, and told her of her happiness. And in tender women's hearts there is such a sympathy in joy or trouble, that little Mary found the answering tears come very readily, as she listened to

all that Olivia had suffered because of her long concealed love for this Sir Warwick Milton.

Olivia's happiness, during the next few days, was too keen, the revulsion of feeling too sudden and violent after her long depression, to which so many causes had tended, for any other subject to occupy her thoughts long. If her anxiety touching Rupert reverted to her mind now, she drove it away. She had no room for anything but joy and gratitude. It was like the lifting of a great stone from her heart, which had kept out light and air. It was impossible to take a gloomy or desponding view of anything in those first hours, when day was flooding in upon her, after a long twilight. She wrote, of course, at once to Rupert, telling him of her engagement, and begging him on no account to delay his coming, which was now fixed for the Saturday. It was on the Wednesday that Mrs. Pomfret and Kate arrived; and that evening, after dinner, the disclosure was made to mother and daughter. Olivia would fain have deferred this for a few days, but she had no choice. Living under Mrs. Pomfret's roof, she could not meet Warwick unreservedly, and at all hours, without telling her hostess how matters stood between them. The astonishment of the two ladies, as may be supposed, was great. Olivia was quite prepared for the form it took in Mrs. Pomfret's mouth.

"Well, to be sure, my dear, you *have* stolen a march upon us all, and done very well for yourself, I *must* say! Such an old baronet, and such a fine place! Three miles to the park gate. And though he has let it, I believe it's more from eccentricity than because he is hard up. But I hope you'll get him out of those odd ways — painting, and all that sort of thing. You'd

better lay down some rules, my dear, beforehand, as to what you expect. Powdered footmen and family prayers — those two things I should be very particular about if I were you. It's really a great catch for you. I can't think how you managed it — though I always said, with reference to my poor angel, Lionel, that you were made to grace *any* station. I had really quite thought of Sir Warwick for Kate; — things turn out so oddly! I thought, with him at the Manor, and us here, it would be so very nice, if ——”

“Pray, mamma, don't talk in that way,” said Kate, tartly. “Just as if I were a bale of goods, and it were convenient to dispose of me in the nearest warehouse. I am much obliged to you. Pray have some regard to my feelings.”

“Well, my dear, I'm sure you made every inquiry about Sir Warwick, yourself, and ——”

“Really, I must beg, mamma, that you won't talk in that way — and before Olivia, too! It's exceedingly disagreeable. But you know mamma's ways, dear, and I'm sure I heartily congratulate you, and think it's the most delightful arrangement. I'm sure he's very nice, or you wouldn't have married him, though he is so rich.”

“It's quite like a thing in a book,” said her mother; “I always said there was a *Jenny say quor* about you, Olivia, which entitled you to look high.” And she shook her head with effusion, while she held Olivia by both hands, at arm's length, and gazed at her with half-shut eyes, as though rapt in a vision of coming greatness for her protégée. “You certainly did quite right not to take poor Julian, though I thought you were wrong *at the time*. I hardly know what use there

is in his coming on Saturday now, though, to be sure, he's always agreeable; and there's Madame Stellino he can play duets with."

Mrs. Pomfret had antedated her arrival, in order to make preparations for the somewhat numerous guests whom she had convened; but Rupert could not get away before the Saturday, from which day his holiday began. Thursday's post, however, brought a few very affectionate lines from him, expressing his unfeigned surprise and hearty joy at the news which her letter had conveyed, and his desire to make Sir Warwick's personal acquaintance, of whom, through Olivia, and by his own letters, he already knew so much. It was quite true: he did most ardently rejoice in his sister's prospects; all he knew of the man she had promised to marry inspired him with confidence and respect; and this man's position would secure to her those solid advantages to which no one, a large portion of whose life is spent in money-getting, can be absolutely dead. Moreover, I will not undertake to say that the leaven of a secret satisfaction at the thought that he was now more absolutely untrammelled to choose his own course, without reference to a dependent sister, was not stirred in with his avowed feelings of pleasure, and caused them to rise yet higher. There was but one little drawback: he could not reconcile this marriage with a certain theory of his own. Now Rupert clung to his theories.

The greeting between these two men, in the forenoon of Saturday, was a very cordial one.

CHAPTER XXII.

Dramatis Personæ.

THE party met together, in the great crimson drawing-room of the Abbey, that evening, numbered fourteen. There was Lord Dumberly, with his brown wig and double eye-glass, talking emptily of diapasons and diminished sevenths to Clara, who leant forward from the low *priedieu* where she was seated, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes fixed on the wrinkled face before her, with a look of the deepest interest. I doubt if she heard a word the old lord uttered. She was watching, with that power of seeing all without looking at anything which some people possess, Julian, who was alone, and moody, at one end of the room; Olivia, Rupert, and Sir Warwick, who were seated together at the other. Strain her hearing as she might, she could not catch a word they said, in the din of talk going on around her; nor would their conversation probably have repaid her; but one thing was clear to her very astute perception; a formidable adversary to her many-sided intricate schemes had unexpectedly arisen. In Sir Warwick Milton she of course at once recognised the only man whom she had ever thoroughly dreaded and hated, and on whom she had exercised all her little feminine arts in vain. She had arrived just before dinner; she had had speech with no one touching Olivia (for the engagement as yet was only permitted to ooze out: it was not publicly proclaimed on the housetops); yet Clara had instantly seized the whole position of affairs. Her part in the

forthcoming drama — the fifth act of which she had not yet arranged for herself, having two, if not three, possible terminations to choose from — her very difficult part, I say, was rendered doubly difficult by the appearance on the scene of this unsympathetic actor. They had acknowledged each other by a bow across the dinner-table; but if a faint hope of conciliating him flitted across her mind, it quickly vanished: he did not even take the trouble of coming up to speak to her when the men returned to the drawing-room. Before Rupert could reach her, Lord Dumberly had sunk into the great gilt arm-chair at her side. It was scene No. 1, and like all first scenes, uninteresting, yet full of significance. Behold her listening (as actresses listen) to the words of wisdom that drop from the lips of that bewigged old lord. Rupert enters, dissatisfied, and joins his sister and Warwick.

Kate, and little Stanridge of the Blues (who really has serious thoughts of proposing, only the fellows at mess chaff him so about his future mamma-in-law), are talking together very pleasantly on the sofa. This is what dramatists call their “secondary plot;” and, if all goes smoothly, there is every prospect — the mess being forty miles away — that these young people will come to “an understanding” before Captain Stanridge has been many days in the house.

Lady Caerlavrock, Mr. Pomfret, and old Harrington are seated together. The latter is doing all the talking; the host is a good silent listener, perhaps hardly laughing as much as your teller of good stories likes, but then Lady Caerlavrock is enough chorus for two. In spite of her small grandeurs, she dearly loves a joke, especially if there be just a dash — no more

— of impropriety in it. She and the good old bachelor get on capitally together: they have lived among the same people for so many years, and know the skeletons in *all* the cupboards of so many families, that their conversation is strewn with hints and allusions to subjects about which Mr. Pomfret knows nothing. To him Lady Caerlavrock is always studiously polite, but their small talk is limited to a narrow range: he has not had the right of way over the social ground which the old bachelor and she have trodden in common. Still, she always speaks of him as “a most excellent man, and so very quiet and unpretending, not the least ostentatious or pushing, while the mother, you know——”

Mrs. Pomfret has a just, if dim apprehension of the light in which her ladyship regards her. She is not fond of Lady Caerlavrock; but it is well in the eyes of that great task-master, the World, that Lady Helena's mother should be known to be a guest at the Abbey; therefore she has been warmly pressed to come, and, as it happens to fit into her ladyship's visiting arrangements, she will remain here a fortnight. Mrs. Pomfret is whispering to Julian, on the ottoman, with a hand-screen held sideways to her mouth, to prevent any chance wind from dispersing a grain of her precious words. It is “a dead secret” — the secret which half the house knows, and half already guesses — which she is thus ostentatiously pouring into his angry and astonished ears, with strict injunctions that he is “to let her confidence go no further.” Julian's face, and the impressive movements of his aunt's cap and curls, behind that pregnant hand-screen, convey to all present a very shrewd suspicion of what is passing.

Julian looks at Sir Warwick more attentively than he has done during dinner, and cannot, for the life of him, see what any woman could discover so wonderfully fascinating about the fellow. For Mrs. Pomfret has told him — she says she “thinks it but right that he should know” — all *she* knows of Olivia’s long though unacknowledged attachment to Sir Warwick, when the young lady believed him to be only an obscure painter. Sir Warwick has the advantage of Julian. He already knows him by sight. He has seen him twice. He knows nothing of Julian’s history. He very little guesses that this is the man whose relations with Olivia (such as he misconceived them to be) caused him, Warwick Milton, so many months of misery; but he sees him there, on terms of the most freezing courtesy with Mrs. Elliston — whom he now hears called Stellino — and Sir Warwick retains a very distinct recollection of a certain evening in the Strand, sixteen months ago. Olivia prepared him for this woman’s arrival; and though he knows, from the few words Olivia has said, that the intimacy between Clara and herself is a thing of the past, yet he is sorry she is here. His antipathy to the woman is as great as ever. He wonders whether Olivia, or any one present, knows that there is some secret bond existing between the actress and this Mr. Westbrook, who barely acknowledge each other in public.

Mary is in a corner doing crochet, and wishing, poor child, that Rupert would come and talk to her, instead of joining Sir Warwick and Olivia, who certainly don’t want him. Perhaps Rupert would do so, but that he remembers what Clara said about Mary, and his sister’s hopes; and as it would be wrong to

give the faintest colour to such — indeed, as he is rather indignant on the subject — he makes up his mind that he is to talk to Mary while he is here as little as possible, though he has, at heart, a kindly feeling towards the girl. Such fruit may a few words, adroitly dropped, produce! Instead of Rupert, a very dull, rich young man, whose name I have forgotten, and who has been asked here in the idea that Mary and he may fancy each other, has planted himself beside her. She wishes it were bedtime.

This is a faint sketch of that society, its grouping, its aspect, and the feelings of its several members towards each other, on that evening, from ten o'clock, when the men came in from the dining-room, until near eleven, when Mrs. Pomfret got up, and thought “we might have a little music, perhaps — eh, Julian? Where’s your corney?”

“In its case,” he replied.

“But you’ll give us a little music, eh? You and Madame Stellino could do a duet, I dare say. Wouldn’t that be nice, Lord Dumberly? The corney and the voice — so very soft. What’s that thing I used to be so fond of — *Robert, Toy que j’aime* — ain’t it?”

“Madame Stellino will sing it to you, alone; it isn’t a duet. It is her *cheval de parade*. She has sung it to so many people, and always with effect.”

She understood full well his covert meaning; it was not often he took the trouble of being sarcastic. She preferred this to his contemptuous carelessness. If she could but rouse him! rekindle, by jealousy, or otherwise, some spark of the old fire! She knew that there was rage at his heart just now, the rage of dis-

comfited vanity, rage at the sight of a favoured rival, and of Olivia's happiness. His wrath must find a vent, but he thought no more of Clara at that moment than the gambler, who sees his fortune swept away, thinks of the spaniel whom he kicks aside. But might she not, now, by utterly ignoring him, by giving his vanity an object to strive for, in the reconquest over a possession to which two other men were laying siege — might she not, possibly, create a revulsion of feeling in him at this moment? Such things had been before now.

She rose, and went to the piano: he was standing near the end of it, and her elbow brushed his hand in passing. A thrill ran through her; she had not felt the touch of that hand for many a long day. Her voice shook when she began to sing: she could not forget herself in her song, as she generally did — never so little an actress, as when giving passionate utterance to fictitious joys and woes. She broke off suddenly; it was no use.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Pomfret, but I can't sing to-night. I don't know what is the matter — I am tired, I suppose. Please forgive me. I'll behave better another evening. I sang that song at the bishop's only last night — you can't think how dear and kind he was about it."

Lord Dumberly. Ah! of course — yes — he knows what's *what*. But, come now, pray don't leave off. It's too tantalising. 'Pon my soul, it's like an angel, the — the swell! — the compass! — positively, three octaves! — from the D below to the D flat above!

Westbrook turned away, muttering to himself.

"It requires *such* an angel, who is, assuredly,

D. D. *below*, to compass such a flat as that — above her!”

Clara. Will not Miss Mary sing? Do please — that last little thing I taught you.

But Mary coldly declined.

Then, Mrs. Pomfret, finding harmony a failure, suggested whist. Lady Caerlavrock, Lord Dumberly, Mr. Harrington, and herself made a table. Now was Rupert's moment come: he glided into the old lord's empty seat beside Clara, and from that position he was not ousted until the whist party broke up, and wine and water and bed candles made their appearance.

It may be remembered that Rupert had a theory regarding the unknown Thompson: that his sister had been jealous of Clara on his account. The announcement of her engagement seemed to destroy this theory. Sir Warwick was devoted to Olivia; and his demeanour towards Clara certainly indicated no admiration — rather the reverse. “Olivia has been prejudicing him against her. How narrow-minded and uncharitable even the best women are towards each other!” This was his thought.

Clara found the opportunity to say two things to him in the course of their conversation.

“Did you not pity me with Lord Dumberly? A whole hour, by Shrewsbury clock, I'm sure, all about the relative merits of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. I was so sick of it. But, you know, I must bear as much of it as he likes to inflict on me, because he has been *so* kind — oh! *so* kind, you can't think; I owe him so much, poor, dear old man!”

The other thing she said was this:

"So I suppose it is all settled between dear Olivia and Sir Warwick? I'm so glad. No one has told me, but of course I have *eyes*. To think of our 'first floor' turning out to be a rich baronet. I can scarcely realise it. I never saw much of him. There were reasons. I think he was set against me. I don't expect he will ever get over the prejudice — and it is true I never liked *him*. Those things one can't help, you know. I am sorry, on account of dear Olivia. I always told her she would marry him, some day. She used to be indignant at the idea, because then he was nothing but a painter, I suppose. Dear Olivia always had a good deal of pride. You see she scarcely notices me, the poor singer, *now* that she is going to be a great lady. Who was right, and who was wrong, Mr. Marston? Didn't I tell you that my coming here would be very unwelcome to her? But, indeed, I don't know who it *is* welcome to. I think I had much better not have come. I have left such warm devoted friends in London! Did you see how rude that Mr. Westbrook was to me, to-night? And even that child, Mary Pomfret, was so ungracious in her manner."

"Oh, come! it's ridiculous, you're imagining that. How can you talk so?" But he remembered Warwick's chilling look and distant bow; he remembered Mary's avoidance of Clara — Mary, who was Olivia's great friend — and he felt his anger stirred against his sister. "At least there are two people who you *know* are more than glad you are here. There's that old idiot of a lord, who wants to be very captivating, I suppose; you ought to be satisfied with *his* welcome —"

("Oh! he is nothing, poor dear old man!")

"And there is a much humbler person, to whom

your coming simply makes all the difference in the world."

He added these last words in a lower tone, and with a passionate gaze, which satisfied Clara that she was not likely to suffer in the young man's eyes by any attempt that might be made to her prejudice.

Among the men in the smoking-room, that night, conversation was not very brisk. Little Stanridge had the talking mostly to himself; and the dull, rich young man, in a gorgeous attire, was his most attentive listener. Rupert smoked his cigar, not only in silence, but with his thoughts other where. Warwick Milton, rooted in the habits of many solitary years, was never very forthcoming among strangers; yet he had made an effort to draw Westbrook into conversation. It had met with no encouragement.

"D—— the fellow's impertinence!" he said to himself: "Does he think he is going to trot me out for his amusement? She has been telling him about me, I suppose. Well, I gave her credit for being better than other women, but their vanity is all alike! That little devil, Clara! I see her game with those two men. How provokingly pretty she looked. I've half a mind — it would be good fun — to drive that fellow Marston mad, by cutting in, and spoiling his fun. If I stay here, I must do something to distract my thoughts!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

Warwick and Julian.

OLIVIA lay awake that night for some hours, having relapsed into all her old uneasiness touching her brother. She had watched him and Clara during the last hour of that evening: she could not be mistaken: the case was even more serious than she had imagined. She accused herself of selfishness in having, in the midst of her own happiness, forgotten her brother's peril. She felt herself, in a measure, personally responsible in this affair. It was not as though he had sought out a woman touching whom all the world spoke ill, and of whose antecedents Olivia knew no more than all the world. She had been the original instrument by which Clara and her brother had become acquainted; and she knew that concerning Clara which was ignored by every one.

And now he would marry her. She felt certain, from her knowledge of him, and from what she had observed that evening, that nothing but the bandage being rudely torn from his eyes would ever make him see this woman as she really was. He was in that condition when a man's passion blinds him to everything — makes him willing to give up everything for the attainment of his object. Now that Olivia was no longer dependent on him, he would marry Clara, beyond a doubt, unless his sister could devise some means of convincing him of the falsity and heartlessness of the little actress.

The night brought with it counsel. She had al-

ways shrunk, in past days, with true womanly delicacy, from discussing Clara with Warwick Milton. Matters were changed now. While guarding the woman's secret, which she had made up her mind nothing should ever induce her to divulge, she felt herself entitled to ask him, who was to be her sole support henceforward, to help in trying to save her brother.

They met Warwick at the parish church, and he walked back with them across the park. There was Clara, demure as a little child, with a very high-church prayer-book in one hand, while with the other she gathered, every now and then, a bluebell as they crossed the rough park, among fern and heather; beside her walked Rupert. The other ladies and one or two men were in front: Olivia and Warwick fell behind. Now was her moment: the eyes of both were on the couple before them.

"Warwick, I want to talk to you about Rupert: I hope you like what you have seen of him?"

"Indeed I do. I am sure he is a straightforward, honourable fellow. He says little; but I don't like a man the less for that, at first."

"The fact is, he is not like himself just now. He is pre-occupied. You wouldn't find him silent generally. I am very unhappy about him. He has fallen desperately in love with Clara."

"So I guessed," replied Warwick, quietly, jerking forward, on the point of his stick, a bramble that lay in the way, till it fell some yards distant among the fern — "and I suppose you have come round to my views about her? She's like that briar — will stick to anything she gets near; only to be removed forcibly

—and the further the better. I hope you were not the means of bringing her here?”

“No, I had nothing to do with it. As regards Rupert, the fact of my having named her so often in my letters drew him naturally towards her when they first met, and her wonderful power of fascinating every one she comes near soon had its effect. I have said everything I possibly could to him; I might as well speak to the winds. I know that she is quite unworthy to be his wife, but—tell me, Warwick, are there any circumstances, do you think, short of life and death, that can justify one’s breaking one’s solemn word, and betraying a secret that has been intrusted to one?”

He was silent for a minute.

“Is this your case, my darling?”

“Unhappily, it is.”

He shook his head. “No, I hardly think so. All the sacredness of trust between man and man would be gone, if it was felt that circumstances in daily life might arise to justify betrayal. There *may* possibly be exceptions to this—but your case, at least, is not one. We must try and arrive at the truth in some other way, if, indeed, your brother’s eyes are not opened in the course of time, as they most probably will be.”

“Ah! no—they will not be opened—and ‘the course of time,’ Warwick, will be short, I fear, before he has pledged himself to her. Oh! If I could only believe that she was really an altered woman—that she really honestly cared for him, and would be to him a good faithful wife, I should be content to let her pass sleep unknown. But, unfortunately, I cannot think it. In spite of all her talk about religion, and her changed tone and manner, I see her trying to attract

every man she comes near — and I am miserable about poor Rupert, who, unless she is flying at higher game, will certainly fall a prey to this heartless little coquette. Will you speak to him, Warwick? Will *you* tell him what you think of her?"

"I am afraid that would be worse than useless," said Warwick. "Without facts, my child, what weight is he likely to attach to my unsupported opinion?" After a pause, he added with some hesitation; "Tell me, were you aware that the man, Westbrook, who seems on the most distant terms now, was intimate with her formerly?"

Olivia coloured; she looked up into the fine manly face beside her; in her love and admiration for him, she felt ashamed of the avowal she was about to make. "Yes, I knew it. — Dear Warwick, this Mr. Westbrook is the person — of whom I spoke to you the other day."

He started, but said nothing. He knew too well how inexplicable what is called "a first love" often seems, after it has taken its place among the things of the past. But in his surprise at this revelation, he was silent for some moments. The subject originally connected with Westbrook, in his thoughts, gave place to another, of far closer interest.

The dark lashes glistened on Olivia's glowing cheeks, as she said presently:

"Do you despise me very much, Warwick? My pride is fallen, you see, since I confess this. You probably have seen enough of Mr. Westbrook, in a few hours, to form no very high opinion of him. — This is my own secret, therefore I have a right to tell it to you. I mean never again to have any secrets from

you, Warwick. — If I could only tell you now what I have at my heart in this affair of Rupert's, I shouldn't be half so unhappy. It is the feeling that I am helpless that makes me miserable."

Then Warwick, while he stroked the fine slight hand that lay in his, knit his brow, and braced up all the loosened energy of his mind to meet this question; how it was possible to gain such knowledge as should save Rupert.

That afternoon Julian lay under the great cedar on the lawn, near the fish-pond; a cigar in his mouth, a novel before him. The cigar was bad, he threw it away; the novel was dull, he tossed it aside in disgust; then the gnats from the water began winding their intolerable little horns all round the back of his neck. He had been growing misanthropic for the last twenty-four hours; he was sick of life — of country-house life especially. Of what good was it for a man with a wretched thousand a year like himself, to try and do, or to possess, anything? Had he been born absolutely poor, he might, with the abilities he had, have worked his way to distinction and fortune. As it was, he had been cursed with just sufficient to keep him from starving, to cripple all energy and ambition; while the prizes in the great lottery all fell to baronets with abbeys and untold wealth. Yes, he was sick of life; the Towers were gone to Spa; he had half a mind to follow them; only it would be uphill work now, as he neglected Lady Harriet all last season, and she looked very coldly at him the last time they met. He didn't know why he stayed on here; it maddened him to see Olivia smiling at her middle-aged lover; the cook, too, was by

no means good; his uncle's dinners — did he not know them of old? — were pretentious in promise, cold and greasy in execution, indigestible in result. He was now suffering, partly, as he knew, from the effects of last night's food, washed down as it had been by the bitter waters of jealousy and wrath. Why should he go on enduring this — the society of a parcel of dull uninteresting people — now that the one object of his hopes was given to another? Would it not be better, and infinitely happier for him, to return to town by the next train? He acknowledged that it would; that is to say, he acknowledged it, when he felt most sentimental, and least venomously sore at heart. At other times, he resolved to stand his ground — not to be driven away; and then the scheme of at once healing his wounded vanity and wreaking his spite against Rupert would recur to him. He would rather have liked a flirtation with Clara; she was prettier than ever, he owned; had they been strangers he would have rushed in, regardless of consequences. As it was, he could not be so regardless; if he gauged her principles correctly, he at least did equal justice to her astuteness. She was bent, he saw, on "rehabilitating" herself; on marriage; if not with one man, why then with another. Though he had very little doubt now, from certain symptoms, of how he would be received, if he showed any indication of a return to his former allegiance, he knew that it would not be on the old footing; and might not this clever little woman manage so to entangle him in the eyes of all present, as to render plausible retreat well nigh impossible? He felt it might be so; and yet, in his irritated objectless condition of mind, that Sunday, the temptation was strong.

Another shadow moved across the lawn, till it stood beside him. He looked up and saw Sir Warwick.

"What the deuce does he want?" thought Julian, but turned the other way again, and offered no encouragement to conversation. He drew out his cigar-case and lit another cigar.

"Will you give me a light?" said Warwick, throwing himself on the grass beside Julian. "My pipe is gone out."

The younger man held out the fusee without a word. "You belong to the Norfolk Westbrooks, I think?" Warwick had puffed away a minute or two in silence, when he thus broke ground. "I used to know your father, when I was a young man."

"Did you," responded the other, without any accent of inquiry in the voice. "That must have been some time ago."

"Yes," said Warwick, imperturbably, "more than twenty years. You were then, I suppose, at school. And yet I am sure I have met you before, somewhere. Your face is quite familiar to me."

"Indeed? There you have the advantage of me; I don't remember ever having seen you before."

"It can't have been in society: I have gone into none for many years. It may have been at the theatre — perhaps when this very little woman, Madame Stellino, has been singing? Did you know her at all when she was on the stage?"

"Slightly."

"She was a very different sort of woman in those days?"

"I should say *not*," returned Julian, with the same extraordinary coolness. "But — as you see — I know

her so very little, that I can't presume to give an opinion."

"I applaud your discretion. However, *I* saw a good deal of the lady at that time —"

(Here Julian turned his head, just so much as should enable him to see Warwick's face: he began to feel stirred by some small emotion of curiosity. What if this model baronet of Olivia's should also turn out to have worshipped at Clara's altar formerly?)

— "and there is certainly a great change. She has become a far more finished actress. No one could have guessed now, by her manner last night, that you and she were — well — slightly acquainted formerly. I lived in the same house with her for some months, therefore I know a good deal about her."

"You lived in the same house?" repeated the other. He began to feel a little uncomfortable; but still more curious. Here was possibly the very opportunity he had long wanted of corroborating certain facts touching Clara. "Then you must be aware," he added, "that I was not on visiting terms with Madame Stellino. I never was inside the doors."

"No: and yet, now I come to think of it, do you know, I am sure I have seen you with her."

"Not very likely; our meetings were few and purely accidental."

"I can certainly recal distinctly one at Exeter Hall. The expression of your face I remember perfectly. You must have been having some quarrel? — I thought so at the time."

"Really? Perhaps you're right. I don't remember. I used to be a good deal with actors and actresses, and they're all very impulsive."

"So you forget what you quarrelled about?"

"If you made as good use of your ears as you seem to have done of your eyes, no doubt you can tell me."

"No. Indeed, I should not have noticed you, but for the fact of being rather curious about Mrs. Elliston — as she then was. There were circumstances attaching to her which did not inspire me altogether with confidence."

"Ah! I suppose she had plenty of visitors, plenty of adorers, bringing their incense, in various forms, to offer up at the shrine of Venus? Possibly you, yourself, may have been among the number?"

"Not exactly."

"But you saw a good deal that led you to think that the goddess was compassionate to her votaries? And the altar was daily besieged, I have no doubt?"

"As to what I may have seen or heard, Mr. Westbrook, I will imitate your discretion. You agree with me that it is far better not to talk about those things."

"You admit, however, by that very speech, that you *did* see a great deal you had better not talk about," persisted Julian, with a laugh: and the indifferent tone in which he spoke could not mask his interest in the subject to an observer like Warwick. "All those women are alike. Presents — admiration — flattery — there is not one of them who is not accessible through her vanity."

Warwick eyed him sharply.

"How comes it then, Mr. Westbrook, that, entertaining the opinion you do of this person, you should allow her to become a guest in your aunt's house, to

associate on terms of intimacy with your cousins, when a word from you would have prevented it?"

Julian winced; but he replied quickly:

"I never interfere with my aunt's guests. And as to character, if one once began trying to purify society, heaven knows where one would stop. But it is evident you know more than *I* do about the lady in question. I ask for information. To me she has always consistently acted the part of maligned virtue, injured innocence, and so on. I confess I have no great faith in these protestations. But your testimony would be worth infinitely more than my suspicions. We shall be duly grateful for it. I really feel rather curious on the subject. She's trying hard to hook old Dumberly, I see."

"She may land him," said Warwick. "I shall not spoil sport. A man of sixty-five can look out for himself."

Julian smiled sarcastically.

"And failing him, I suppose, Marston? He's very far gone, I see — and Miss Marston, I believe, is an intimate friend of madame's, so it will be a very nice little arrangement."

Warwick saw that this was meant to annoy him, but he replied quietly, that he "did not suppose, after baiting for salmon, that madame would be content with a minnow." Soon after this, he got up, and strolled away.

He had no further conversation with Julian then, or for some days after. If he had failed to acquire much positive information, he had, at least, gained an insight into the man's character; and he had discovered his anxiety to obtain proof, whereby a distinct ac-

cusation, touching that portion of her life when Warwick had known her, might be fastened upon Clara. He pondered much on this; on the way in which Westbrook had spoken of her; of his affected indifference, ignorance, and unreadiness to breathe more than vague general suspicions of her as one "of a class;" while his eagerness to find these suspicions confirmed, by accusations from the lips of others, could not be concealed.

Warwick went to London early on Monday morning; ostensibly on legal business connected with his marriage. He was absent the greater part of that week; running down of an evening sometimes to see Olivia, and returning to town by the first train in the morning. I do not propose to trace out the circuitous paths, beset with difficulties, whereby he ultimately arrived at the object in view. Whether that mysterious Mr. Pollaky, whose advertisements stimulate the curiosity of the inquiring reader of the *Times*, was the agent through whom his efforts were crowned with success, I am not prepared to say. But all that week, Warwick, himself, was among managers, actors, scene-shifters, dirty men and women of all kinds; several times with Mrs. Flaherty, and through her, after many failures (she had heard the address, but could not remember it clearly), was brought to the humble lodging in Pimlico, where Mrs. Boyce still lived. And thus, after a tearful story from the poor woman, it came to pass that, in the twilight of Saturday evening, Warwick Milton stood beside a little child's grave in Kensal Green.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Last Appeal.

"DUMBERLY," said Lady Caerlavrock (who was a plain-spoken woman, by times), one morning after breakfast, as she drew him aside, "you're making a fool of yourself with that little singer. She'll get I don't know what nonsense into her head, if you go on as you did last night. People quite remarked it — they did really."

"Gad, my dear," said the old lord, *se dindonnant* (for which I can think of no equivalent), "if people will talk they must talk. She's an uncommon nice little thing — with manners quite unlike the general run of young women now a days. She has the art of listening with interest to what one says, which so few possess. She's really dooced agreeable. If I took her in hand, I could make her a scientific musician, which she isn't at present. But she seizes one's ideas — Jove! how she does seize 'em! I was, only last night, pointing out to her how the relative minor —"

"Oh, yes, Dumberly, I know all that, but for heaven's sake, don't think of 'taking her in hand,' as you call it. There is no saying what it might lead to. The woman's either exceedingly simple, in which case you may be leading her to form all sorts of ridiculous hopes, or she is very deep. Any way, it is really preposterous your going on like this. That young Marston, who is evidently desperate about her, and who would not be such a very unsuitable match as to station, I suppose, looked as if he could have killed

you. Do pray think, Dumberly, of what you owe to your family and to society."

"If Madame Stellino finds my conversation agreeable —" began his lordship with pomp.

"Oh, stuff!" interrupted his sister. "As if any young woman could find it agreeable to hear you go on for the hour together about flats, and sharps, and dominants, and all that!"

"If nature never gifted you with an intellect to comprehend the science," returned Lord Dumberly, a good deal piqued, "that's no reason why you should deny it to others. It's dooced bad taste, my dear, to say the least of it. I was about to remark, when you interrupted me, that as long as Madame Stellino finds my conversation agreeable, I shall not be deterred from talking to her, by any rubbish people may choose to say."

I doubt whether Lady Caerlavrock had not done more harm than good.

She had said truly: Rupert had occasional half hours of torturing jealousy. The position was one that needed all Clara's skill: she had a little difficulty sometimes in persuading him that gratitude for past kindness, and a due regard to her future professional interests, rendered it necessary for her to submit to Lord Dumberly's twaddle by the hour together. Then, at the word "professional interests," he started away with an impatient exclamation. Was it not the desire of his life, now, to take her away from all that? and he could not bring her actually to the point of a decisive 'Yes.' But things were approaching a crisis. Clara saw that they could not go on thus many days. She was a gambler throwing her last main. The highest

number that the dice could turn up was to see Westbrook at her feet once more; the only man she had ever loved, and whom she now studiously shunned. Fortune had so far favoured her: his discomfiture about Olivia, leaving his self-love grievously wounded, and his daily occupation gone, rendered him in a fitting condition to take refuge in the first substitute that offered itself; and the fact of her being an object of very open admiration to two other men in the same house was calculated to stimulate his vanity in the pursuit. She believed that if she could once again enchain him, even in weak bonds like these, she could gradually obtain such an ascendancy over him as would convert each thread of silk into an iron fetter. She had been but a child at the time of that foolish, miserable passage in their common history. She was now a woman; with all a woman's will, and subtlety, and knowledge of man's nature. Perhaps there was no character in sacred or profane history with which she had more sympathy than Delilah: not with her perfidy, be it understood, but with her power of rendering the strongest man prostrate before her. With this one man had she hitherto signally failed: he had, on the contrary, prostrated her. That he should no longer do so, that she should bring him under subjection, was the dearest wish of her heart. The next highest number that the dice could show, was the gratification of worldly ambition, and the triumph over all who had humiliated her, in the shape of a coronet and affluence — coupled, though it was, with a vain and tedious old man. The lowest number of all — for she was tolerably secure now from a blank — was Rupert, with his devotion and his very moderate means. She pitted these three

men, one against the other: in the feverish watches of those summer nights she lay scheming, and turning over in her mind the successes or the disappointments of the past day.

One afternoon, it was on the Wednesday or Thursday of that week, she had gone up to her own room an hour before dinner. A cup of tea, untasted, was on the dressing-table before her. She sat, her two elbows on her knees, and her chin resting in her hands, her eyes fixed upon the wall before her. She was in one of her wayward moods, half remorseful — reluctant to pursue to the end that course which she had so deliberately laid out for herself. In spite of all her outward success, there was bitterness at her heart: its first, though hidden desire remained unfulfilled. Julian never came near her: he watched her with curiosity, perhaps even with admiration, but it was at a distance: he appeared amused at seeing her with Lord Dumberly and Rupert. It seemed as if there was no spark of passion left that could be fanned into a flame again by opposition. Her hopes, miserable little woman — her hopes in this quarter were dwindling away hour by hour. And then, that next highest number for which she was striving and straining every nerve, why, when she sat down to think, as she now did, its possession, her possible success, made her sick by anticipation. There was that honest young nature, that devoted man's heart, to fall back upon; and here it was that something akin to compunction smote her. There were moments when she shrank from deceiving him, even unto the altar, with a pretence of love. Perhaps, left to herself, the better angel who spoke at such moments might have triumphed just then; unfortunately, anta-

gonism and jealousy arose and banded themselves on the other side.

There was a knock at the door, and Olivia entered.

The two young women had interchanged but few words in all those days. Clara saw that Olivia avoided her, and she resented it. Whenever Rupert was at Clara's side, a glance at his sister's troubled face gave a zest to the matter in hand, though Clara always studiously avoided seeming to encourage him. She suffered him — no more. If he chose to fall in love with her, how could she help it? This is what her manner with Olivia implied. She knew Olivia was her enemy — her deadly enemy, in this matter of the brother, and she was in her enemy's hand, yet such was her faith in Olivia's unwavering sense of honour that she had no fear of being betrayed.

She had said "Come in," and the door had opened. She started upon seeing who it was.

"Dear Olivia! This is an unexpected pleasure! This is quite like old days. I thought you had given me up entirely, now that you are going to be a great lady. Don't take that hard chair, dear, you'll find this much more comfortable."

"Clara, I am come to talk to you seriously; will you listen to me? Never mind the chair; I am very well here. Above all, pray be simple and sincere with me, if you can. You know, as well as I do, that if I had given you up, it has nothing to do with my being 'a great lady,' as you call it. Our conversation can do no good, if we are not both of us to speak the truth, and it is quite unnecessary to act with *me*. You're much cleverer than I am, but I know you now. Will you be honest with me, for once?"

Clara tried to laugh.

"Well, then, to be honest, for once, suppose I say that it will entirely depend on honesty seeming to be the best policy? But I know, beforehand, all you are going to say. You're going to talk to me about that brother of yours. It's no use in the world, my dear, appealing to me. *I can't help it.*"

"Do you mean to marry him, if he asks you?" Olivia put the question bluntly, but her voice shook.

"He *has* asked me."

"*He has asked you?*" And what — what did you say?"

"That he must wait; that I couldn't make up my mind."

"Clara, for mercy's sake, refuse him. I implore — see, I beg of you on my knees! You don't love him. I *know* you don't, or I shouldn't — no, I swear to you — I shouldn't oppose his marrying you as I do. He is mad — he doesn't know what he is doing. My only hope now is in you. You know my lips are sealed — that I can tell him nothing of your dreadful past. Oh! if you have a spark of truth and honour left, at least tell him everything before you let him call you his wife. But better — far better than this, let your secret lie buried, and refuse him. What will it cost you? He has very little to give except his honest love, which to you would be absolutely worthless. You'll break his heart. Oh! spare him, Clara; don't do so wicked a thing as to let him marry you in his ignorance of what you are!"

"Why not?" asked Clara, with a heightened colour and an excited tone, which was rare with her. "If your brother is less worldly than you — we all know

that *you* wouldn't marry in ignorance of what Mr. Thompson was — if he doesn't think about the disgrace of the connexion, or ask any question about my first marriage, why am I to tell him? Do you think there are not plenty of things in his past life he wouldn't exactly tell you and me? Why is there to be that difference between a man and a woman? I don't see it. Is my whole life to be blasted because of my misfortune, and a man's cruel conduct to me? Pray, do you charitably shut me out, in consequence, from forming any future ties? And if I refuse your brother, am I, on the same grounds, to go on refusing every man who offers me the safety and comfort of a home?"

"Would there be safety or comfort in it? dreading the discovery, at any moment, of a secret which must ruin all domestic happiness? Think of what such a man as Rupert's love is! his entire faith, his generous refusal to believe anything, even the evidence of his own eyes, against the woman he loves. Will you betray such a nature as this, Clara? You'll find richer, more powerful men in the world — men whom you *may* love, perhaps — and to whom the blow would be less cruel. To him, the discovery of his wife's treachery and dishonour would embitter his whole life."

"Since we are to speak the truth," said Clara, her small eyes flashing, "let me say that I am perfectly aware you have done your *best* to open his eyes, short of perjuring yourself. You have left nothing unsaid that could prejudice me. When you dilated on the presents I received, it is a pity that your candour, Olivia, didn't make you confess all that *you* received from Mr. Thompson; the clock he bought, pretending to have recovered it, the fruit, and game, and wine, the

fictitious sale (oh, I heard all about it afterwards, when I called there, from Mrs. Flaherty) which produced such unheard-of results. You can act surprise and indignation, I see, my dear, as well as I could, and, to be sure, it doesn't much signify, now that he turns out to be a baronet and that you're going to marry him. It's all very fine for *you*, only it is rather hard that I should be visited with so much virtuous indignation for accepting an occasional cadeau, worth a few shillings, when you took hundreds of pounds' worth, without the smallest hesitation."

Clara had bided her time to strike this blow at her former friend. But for Olivia's engagement, it would indeed have been crushing. As it was, for a minute or two Olivia looked at her dumb-founded.

"God knows whether you are speaking the truth," she said at last; "but if this be so, Warwick will tell me. I can have no pride about it now, though a week since it would have wounded me more than words can tell. If it be as you say, he knows, and you know too, Clara, how utterly ignorant I was of it; and also that, however plausible your defence is, there is little analogy between the two cases. However, we won't talk of your past; of this or any other act. It isn't by these I would judge you: but—I ask myself—if the change in you were real, is it possible you could go on as you are doing, both with the old man and with my brother? And supposing you cared for Rupert, would you not be the first to insist upon his knowing your whole history, before accepting him? Oh, Clara! my words are weak, I know, but I once stood beside you in an hour of bitter trial; you once called me 'your only friend.' In memory of that hour, which it's im-

possible that you do not think of sometimes, I implore you not to take this cruel advantage of the oath you extracted from me. If *you* will not speak, there are only two courses for me; either I must betray you, or submit to see my brother betrayed. I wish I could think that I was warranted in revealing your secret. I can't think so, unfortunately: the sin of concealing this, Clara, must rest with you. I have said all that I have to say."

Clara's face had gone very white during part of the above speech. She turned it away.

"I have never doubted you. There are some people one never *really* doubts in one's heart. I was bitter and unjust a moment ago: forgive me. I am wretched just now, though I seem so different — and no human being guesses what is in my heart. There was a time when I might have talked to you, but all that is past. Of course, I know that we never can be again as we once were: but I'm not as ungrateful as you think. Now leave me — my head aches so, I must lie down, or I shall be such a fright at dinner. I can't say what I shall do; whether I shall have him or not. Don't talk any more of it now, Olivia. I can't make any promise. It must depend upon circumstances."

Olivia, heavy at heart, left the room. She knew the sandy soil upon which her words had fallen too well to hope much from it. Some little impression, perhaps, had been made, but the first wave of circumstance — meaning vanity, pique, or self-interest — would clean efface that impression. She had a greater fear than ever, now, in her heart, that this thing would be. She had done all she could: if it was to be stopped, it must be by other agency than hers. She knew nothing of Warwick's exertions in the

matter, for he told her nothing, and she believed that he was powerless to help her. It was therefore she had appealed to-day to Clara; with what result we have seen.

An hour later all her fears were confirmed, when, on entering the drawing-room, she found Madame Stellino seated on the sofa beside Rupert, who was helping her to tie up some carnations. She seemed more seductive than ever the whole evening. She sang like an angel, and Lord Dumberly was in the seventh heaven. She had on her arm, for the first time, a diamond bracelet. Of course, all the women observed it; and all made a pretty accurate guess whence it came. Lady Caerlavrock's indignation was undisguised: even Mrs. Pomfret murmured to Olivia that she doubted whether Madame Stellino was not a good deal *deeper* than she appeared. Nevertheless, it was to Rupert that she very decidedly directed all her glances — perhaps with the object of driving the old nobleman to desperation — and it was for Rupert that she made room on the ottoman, after his lordship had been standing, shakily, over her for a quarter of an hour. Julian was in an arm-chair with the new *Quarterly*, in which he made a show of being absorbed. I think he was watching her, over the top of the book, with mingled admiration, disgust, and curiosity. "Clever little Jezebel!" said his thoughts. "How she twists them both round her finger. She is really thrown away here. Just the woman to serve a political party. What are the odds she catches the old man? Well, at last, Clara Elliston, you are showing yourself to me now in your true light, without any humbug. I like you better so. If you would always have shown yourself thus — Upon my life, if it

wasn't for the consequences, I should feel inclined to go in again, even now, and spoil the sport here. But it wouldn't do. Once out of the fire (and not without burnt fingers), I should be a fool to tumble into it again."

Clara knew that he had never turned a leaf of that *Quarterly* he held in his hand. With exultation had she twice detected his eyes fastened upon her. Was there even yet, then, a hope left?

"You must be pleased to see your great friend and your brother getting on so well," Julian took an opportunity of saying, with a sneer, to Olivia that evening.

"She fascinates every one," was her reply.

There was a pic-nic in the woods next day. In a narrow path, for two minutes, Clara and Westbrook were close to each other, and alone.

"You aim at high game," he said, "and I shouldn't much wonder if you brought him down. I admire your skill. Who'd have thought of this four years ago, eh?"

"Who, indeed!" she rejoined bitterly.

"Doesn't this sort of thing bore you? I suspect you like the old Bohemian life better? Confess."

"There were things in the old life I liked better," she said, with passionate meaning, as she looked up into his face.

"All this cant about charity, this talk about bishops and curates — it's very dull. Even the cold after-dinner applause you get — don't you long to exchange it for the excitement of the stage, the rapture of the pit and gallery?"

"I would exchange it for the belief I had, then, in

man's honour and truth — a belief which will never return to me."

"No doubt," he laughed. "You have tried too many to have much stability of faith in men."

"Mr. Westbrook!" called Lady Caerlavrock, "with your long arms and your stick, can you reach us those water-lilies?"

After an ineffectual attempt he waded in, up to his knees. At such moments, when the dandy gave place to the athletic man, whose movements were all graceful, Julian looked to particular advantage.

"Quite like a river-god, isn't he?" cried Mrs. Pomfret.

Clara thought so; and began fastening her shoe — her pretty little shoe — up, on the bank. She wondered whether he would give one of those lilies to her; and perhaps the thought was carried to him, by some electric fluid. After gathering an arm full of lilies, as he waded back to the bank, he stooped to pick a forget-me-not.

"Pretty little blue thing, isn't it?" he said, as he passed her, and dropped the flower into her lap. Among the other ladies he divided the lilies. Some of them wore the flowers in their hair that evening; some of them threw away "those nasty oozy things" before they reached home. One person, only, treasured the little water weed that had been given her, wondering whether it might have any significance.

Two mornings after this, on the same Saturday that Warwick Milton brought his investigation to a successful issue, a slight accident interfered with one of Clara's schemes. Lord Dumberly, while dressing, had

a paralytic seizure. But for this, the probabilities are, I think, that there would be a Viscountess Dumberly at this moment; instead of which, the title, as we know, became extinct, on the death of the late lord, a few months since. He never saw Clara again after that Friday night, when he squeezed her hand as he gave her a candlestick, and affectionately wished her "pleasant dreams." He lingered, with impaired powers of utterance, more than three years, but his nerves could never again stand the sound of music, and his careful relations kept all seductive singers out of his way.

CHAPTER XXV.

Miss Pringle unbosoms Herself.

THERE was to be a large dinner-party that evening at the Abbey: and as some of the bidden guests were to come long distances, it would have been very difficult to put them all off. After the country doctor had pronounced Lord Dumberly to be in no immediate danger, Lady Caerlavrock had begged that her brother's illness might not interfere with the projected entertainment. Two physicians arrived from London in the course of the day; and telegrams were sent all over the country to sundry nephews and others, interested in his lordship's state of health. After that, Lady Caerlavrock, not being a woman who gave way to foolish anxieties, but rather feeling herself anhungered by the confinement in a close room, went and dressed herself for dinner.

Among the guests were Mr. Tharpe and Algy, who

came from London to the barrister's cottage for his Sunday's holiday; and had been invited at Olivia's special request. And — *not* at Olivia's request, but because of Mrs. Pomfret's kindly nature, cropping out through all her absurdities — Miss Pringle had been invited to spend a week at the Abbey, and was also to arrive to-day.

"I think it would please the old soul, my dear, to come and offer her congratulations to you," was Mrs. Pomfret's plea to Olivia; "and though her conduct was really quite unjustifiable about Sir Warwick, and though I know she made your life a burthen to you, still, in her way, she's fond of you, and she's old and all alone. Then she talks, which is always a *great* thing in a party, and she plays whist; and though I couldn't have her in London, you understand, when one really hasn't *room* for old women, it is different here. I think Lady Caerlavrock would be quite amused with her, so I mean to make my peace with your aunt, my dear (though I know she is furious with me), and invite her down here on Saturday."

Miss Pringle, like a wise woman, pocketed her past affronts and accepted. She arrived, with a splendid new supply of caps for the occasion, and wept a few tears as she folded her niece in her little withered arms, ejaculating:

"My dear, dear child! This is, indeed, gratifying! To think that all my exertions for you should have been so crowned! I hardly know how to believe it. Such a *fine* man, my dear, quite irrespective of the fortune and the title, and all. I ever thought there was something about him unlike the common herd. And then the nobility of his sentiments in not wishing

you to know his rank — so touching — so very touching! I'm sure I've said to myself, fifty times, 'That man can never be a common painter.' Ah! how right you did to refuse that young Tharpe — every way an inferior match. Poor young man! You should have seen the Quintus Smiths' astonishment when I told them the match you were going to make. But, indeed, as I said to her, the Pringles, being descended from Robert the Bruce's henchman, are quite entitled to intermarry with the highest in the land. I knew, all along, that it only required for you to *mix* —"

"In order to settle," laughed Olivia; but the next moment she sighed, for her thoughts reverted to Rupert.

Poor Algy Tharpe was naturally a little flustered when he first appeared. He bolted up to Olivia, stumbling over a footstool on his way, and ignoring the entire Pomfret family in his nervous excitement, until the fact was gently recalled to him by Olivia. Then, blushing scarlet, he made a plunge at his host and hostess, and returned to Olivia's sofa, pouring out, in a continuous stream, whatsoever words would let themselves be delivered from his mouth.

"I'm awfully glad, Miss Marston. I am, indeed. He's such a splendid dear old fellow. I always told you he was, before I thought that you thought — I mean before I knew that you knew — you know what I mean. Well, since then, I've been with him for months, and I know him, and love him, ever so much better; and I wanted to see you, and to tell you that — that I'm not such a fool as I was, Miss Marston, and that I am tremendously glad you're going to marry such a trump as Sir Warwick — and — and —"

Olivia here came to his aid.

"I was very glad when I found you were abroad with him. I knew you couldn't be in better hands. And he has spoken of you to me with so much affection and gratitude. He says that, but for your watching, he would not be alive now. And he tells me, too, what made me so very happy to hear, that you have come back determined to work hard, and in good heart about it."

"Well, I think — I hope I have. The governor's been awfully kind — seems to think I really may do something. A fellow can but try, you know; so I'm going to begin grinding on Monday."

After dinner, Miss Pringle watched her opportunity and fastened upon the young man. She felt herself, like the ancient mariner, compelled to disgorge her sentiments into the ear of every "wedding-guest," no matter how inappropriate, or how distasteful the narrative might be to the listener.

"My dear Mr. Algernon, this is indeed a coincidence, is it not? our meeting on *such* an occasion as this, eh? I feel for you — I do, indeed. But it must be a consolation to you, I think, that she is going to marry a baronet. Had it been a plain mister, the blow would naturally have been much greater. I *always* told your dear aunt, Mrs. Quintus, that my Olivia was made to grace a lofty sphere. Still, being of a romantic turn myself, I can feel for you, my dear Mr. Algernon, from the bottom —"

"Thank you, Miss Pringle. You're very good. Don't talk about it, please. Of course I was an ass ever to think she could care for such a fellow as me.

And she's going to have the best and noblest husband any woman ever had, and —"

"This is truly magnanimous — quite touching, my dear Mr. Algernon! for, it's no use denying it, I know *all* you must feel at this meeting. Ah! it reminds me of a man at Bath who saw me once, in the Assembly Rooms, after *some years* had passed. He was so affected, poor man, that he left the room *instantly*, without *trusting* himself to come up and speak to me. I assure you I *felt* it more than if he had come up and said ever so much. Ah! Mr. Westbrook, I've not said 'How d'ye do?' to you yet" (here Algy Tharpe made a bolt for it), "and we've not met for a long time. How does the trumpet go on? Still play, eh? I see your name sometimes in the *Morning Post*, at parties — always *look* for it."

"It isn't often there," said Julian, with a superfine air, as he stroked his silky moustache. "I have almost given up going to people who let in reporters. It's what all the outsiders do, and it's decidedly snobbish."

His aunt, who was hard by, had paid largely to have a reception of fine folk duly chronicled, a fortnight before: and as to the marriage, though that was no affair of hers, *she* best knew (Julian only suspected) who it was that had supplied all those interesting details about the bridesmaids' dresses, and the presents, which had filled half a column of the *Morning Post*. The poor lady got very red, and walked away.

"Charming marriage of my dear niece's — isn't it, Mr. Westbrook? Everything one could desire, and I'm sure you'll agree with me that she's fitted to grace *any* sphere? Ah! I remember, at the Cedars, how you used to blow away at sentimental tunes — you

were an admirer of hers in those days, eh? Well, every one can't be equally blessed, you know; as I often remarked to poor dear General Tufts, at Harrogate, when he sighed over his large family, and alluded *pointedly* to single blessedness — for we had known each other in *other* days. 'No!' I said, 'had you touched my heart, general, when you were a penniless ensign, you might not now have the misfortune of this *large family*.' 'Indeed, I should think *not*!' he replied, very feelingly. Poor man! he was carried off by the waters last year, leaving a widow with nine sons and daughters."

"The blessing of being a baronet, with twenty thousand a year," sneered Julian, "is like mercy. It blesseth the man who gives and the woman who takes; and it counterbalances, in the eyes of a sensible woman, any number of drawbacks, such as age, eccentricity, and the fact of succeeding to a first wife, who was the drunken daughter of a low apothecary. No, Miss Pringle, we are not all equally blessed: you're quite right."

Aunt Clo would probably have been equal to the occasion, and have turned off, playfully, a very rude unpleasant speech, but that she espied Mr. Tharpe within hailing distance. Temptation and a graceful escape presented themselves alike under the form of the grisly large-nosed barrister. It was handling edge tools; but that, poor old lady, she forgot, in her exultation, and the necessity under which she laboured of pouring herself out on the one subject which kept bubbling up, like a perennial fountain, in her mind.

"Mr. Tharpe! Mr. Tharpe! Pray come and say How d'ye do?' You've not forgotten me, I *hope*?"

"There are things which, when once seen, ma'am, can never be forgotten," said the lawyer. Then he sat down in a chair in front of her, for the better examination of this natural curiosity, while he drew out of that particular drawer of his memory, marked 'Pringle — old idiot — girl's aunt — interview, February 23rd,' all the facts regarding this fossil, which he had put away for the last six months.

"How very pretty of you, Mr. Tharpe! Now, really, I call that—! It reminds me, — but you'll think me vain if I tell you, eh? besides I know you're dying to congratulate me on this auspicious event, now, ain't you? I went to see your dear sister yesterday, to tell her of the delightful news; for it *is* delightful now, isn't it? Everything one could desire, and so fitted as my Olivia is to grace any sphere! We *had*, you remember, *other* views for her *once*, eh? but I've got to think that wouldn't have *done*."

"Done what, ma'am? As the girl isn't a fool — I don't know much about gracing spheres — but as she seems to have common sense, she refused my cub of a boy, and has done him some good, for which she has my thanks. I suppose, ma'am, you've chosen your permanent bedroom at the old Manor House? I remember that living with your niece entered into your 'views.'"

"My dear sir, pray be careful! Don't speak so loud. I wouldn't for the world — you understand, eh? there is a delicacy in these matters. I hope, in the course of *time*, that the affection between Sir Warwick and myself, of which I may truly say I have long felt the seeds germinating, may ripen. You have known him, I believe, many years?"

"Yes; and I never thought he would have been fool enough to have married again. One trial of that work, ma'am, is enough in a lifetime."

"Mr. Tharpe! — Really —"

"You were wise, ma'am, in your generation ("the last," he muttered). No doubt you had great difficulty in avoiding that state of bondage, but you did avoid it. You were wise, ma'am."

"Well, Mr. Tharpe, what you say has — certainly — great *truth* in it; still that view of matrimony is hardly, eh? — altogether quite orthodox — seems almost profane, I'm afraid. And as to my niece —"

"Oh, I've nothing to say against the young woman; only, you see, the whole institution, my good lady, is a mistake — a horrid mistake. Now, if they made a temporary arrangement —"

"Mr. Tharpe! can I believe my ears? I'm shocked. This is really bordering upon grossness! Olivia, my love, do come and talk to this naughty, *naughty* man, who is saying such things, he quite, quite frightens me!"

She hopped off, leaving Olivia and Mr. Tharpe standing together. He had scarcely ever spoken to the girl before; he had watched, and had listened to her, carefully and silently, on the two or three occasions when they had met; and she had very studiously avoided him. But now these two people wanted simultaneously to say a few words to each other.

"Miss Marston, I really believe you've stirred up that lout of mine into a desire to work — into feeling a just contempt for his own idleness and ignorance. If so — if it doesn't all end in smoke — you'll have done him the greatest service any one human being can confer upon another."

"Will you, in return, confer one on me?" She was not afraid of him now: however uncouth and sarcastic he might be, her altered position towards Algeron's father now enabled her to speak without hesitation. "I do not think you have ever done your son justice, Mr. Tharpe. Of course I am not foolish enough to suppose that any words of mine could alter your opinion, or your conduct, but Sir Warwick says —"

"Ah, Sir Warwick is an enthusiast, Miss Marston — 'carried away by his feelings,' as people call it. A man has no business with feelings. They play the deuce with his judgment."

"I'd rather have the impaired judgment, then, since the two are incompatible, according to you. I was going to tell you that Sir Warwick found him a most pleasant travelling companion; interested in everything they saw. He says he never knew any one with a truer appreciation of Nature — more keenly alive to all that is beautiful and grand."

"As to that, Miss Marston, any old woman can rave about light and shade, and moonlight and mountains, and so on. But I talked to him the other night about Italy for a few minutes; and it really did seem to me that he had picked up an idea or two, about the condition of the people, and the political state of the country, — which was more than I expected."

"Some people expect too much. I think you expect too little of your son, Mr. Tharpe. If you appeared to think it possible that he *could* do anything, you would double his chances of success. Perhaps he has never spoken of himself as much to you as he has to me. Women, I suppose, have the power of draw-

ing more out of such natures than most men, most fathers, have."

"Probably. I believe you're right. Well, he has got an opening, and I'm ready to believe he wants to work. But you know the adage about 'new brooms.' If this one don't go to pieces at the end of three months, I shall have more faith in the lasting effects of a woman's influence than I ever had before. Where is Sir Warwick?"

"In London, on business; but I hope he will be down to-morrow."

* * * * *

Clara had been singing, and was still at the piano. Mrs. Pomfret asked her to accompany "my nephew, who has kindly consented to play that sweet thing from the *Trovatore*." As he bent over the music-stand, ostensibly pointing out how certain passages were to be taken, he murmured, "I feel for your disappointment. Only a bracelet instead of a coronet! You did all a woman could do — but it's no good; the game's up now. And as to that Marston, let me recommend you, as a friend, not to throw yourself away on a fellow in that position, where your talents can't have fair play. You can do better for yourself than that."

"Thank you for the advice. Mr. Marston is at all events a man I can trust, and who, I believe, is sincerely attached to me."

"He is a muff, and a prig. As to his moral qualities —"

"You don't think I'm capable of appreciating them? Perhaps not: but I can, at least, appreciate faithfulness."

"It's a great mistake to expect that. I should have

thought you were too clever. Have you found it in any one of the many men with whom you've been singing this very '*Non ti scordar di me*' since we used to sing it together?"

She played a chord. "Mr. Westbrook, are you ready to begin?"

When he had done, she got up without a word, and walked away. His hand (this time she fancied it was not quite accident) was dropped close to hers as she rose. Once again the touch thrilled her in a way that nothing else ever did.

* * * * *

Warwick Milton and Rupert stood on the terrace together. It was Sunday night; and the party had retired — the ladies to bed, the other men to the smoking-room. Warwick had arrived that afternoon, but he had said no word to Olivia concerning Clara, and he had resolved to wait until this moment before speaking to Rupert. The condition of things, indeed, as Warwick had himself seen that evening, made it imperative that he should now communicate what he had to say, at once. Thwarted in her manœuvres with respect to Lord Dumberly, and rendered desperate by Julian's conduct, which gave her a ray of hope at moments, only to leave her in more complete darkness afterwards, Clara was resolved to bring matters to an issue. Her encouragement of Rupert was so marked, that no one could mistake it. He had never left her side all night. He looked radiant.

"Come, and let us smoke our cigars out here. I want to talk to you," Warwick had said; and then they had gone to the end of the terrace, where there

was a bench, and where they were out of ear-shot from the house.

"Marston, I've an unpleasant business to talk over with you. The close relationship in which we shall soon stand towards each other alone justifies me, on so slight an acquaintance, in meddling in your personal concerns. It is, of course, evident to every one here that you admire Madame Stellino very much; that, in short, you mean to marry her."

He paused. Rupert did not hesitate a moment to reply.

"You are right. Well, and what then? Of course I know — I can see — that Olivia has prejudiced you against her. Has she asked you to speak to me on the subject? If so, Milton, let me tell you, it's no use in the world. My mind's made up. I can only hope that time will make my sister less absurd — less cruel and unjust than she now is. Because a woman —"

"Now, my dear fellow, will you listen to me, calmly, for a few minutes? What I have to say will, I know, be painful, but you must hear me to the end. Olivia is neither cruel nor unjust. Her opinion of Madame Stellino is founded on what she *knows*, and this she has never divulged to any one. I have only just learnt it myself. You are deceived in this woman. I can prove to you that she is unfit to be your wife."

"Prove it," he exclaimed, vehemently.

"She was unfaithful to her husband. She had a child by another man — a man you know — a man who is in this house now."

Rupert dashed his cigar to the ground.

"By G—! if this is true. Who is it?"

"Westbrook. — Of course, like every fellow of

that sort, he refused to marry her when the husband died, and they are now on the coldest terms, as you see. To save her reputation she never acknowledged this child—rarely saw, utterly neglected it—and it died. All this I can prove; and all this, Olivia, who watched alone by that child's death-bed, has known and has kept secret for the last eighteen months."

The poor fellow started up, and walked rapidly to the other end of the terrace. Even the darkness was not enough to cover the sharp agony of that moment, which he desired to hide from every mortal eye.

Presently he came back.

"Tell me all. I want to know everything *you* know, Milton. You may have been deceived. There may be many extenuating circumstances you've not heard. Tell me all — for, by heavens! I can't believe it, even now."

Warwick related the story of Clara's past life, as he had traced it out; he gave Rupert the evidence of the various persons whom he had seen; he spared him no detail, even unto the death-bed of the little child, as it had been told him by Mrs. Boyce. Rupert heard him to an end, only interrupting him once or twice to ask a question; and he still sat, silent and motionless, his head buried in his hands, long after Warwick had done.

"Marston," said the other, at last, "thank God this knowledge comes yet in time to you. I suffered once, as you are doing, but with this difference — I learnt the worthlessness of the woman I loved *after* she had become my wife. Thank God! you have taken no irrevocable step. The blow must be heavy enough, whenever it falls, that shatters all our love and hope

and trust, but at least you are spared a life-long misery by having your eyes opened before it was too late."

Still Rupert neither moved nor spoke. A bat flapped by them, and the soft summer night wind sighed among the leaves, but there was no other sound for nearly a quarter of an hour. At last, the younger man rose.

"Good night," he said. "I can't talk about this now. I feel stunned — my thoughts all crushed, somehow. I suppose, in a few hours, I shall begin to see things more clearly. The night brings counsel they say. Good night." He turned abruptly towards the house. The low, broken voice told Warwick better than any words that Rupert could have uttered, how poignant was the young man's suffering.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Struggle for Mastery.

THE post-bag the following morning contained one letter for Madame Stellino. She opened it at the breakfast-table, cast her eye carelessly over its contents, and slipped it into her apron pocket with an air that bespoke plainly the slender interest aroused by the communication. Not thus did she read a note just afterwards which a servant placed in her hands. Rupert had not appeared at breakfast. She recognised his handwriting before she read the words:

"Will you be in the Vineyard in half an hour's time? I have something of importance to say to you."

She raised her eyes, they met Westbrook's on the opposite side of the table, and the shadow of a satirical smile touched the corners of his mouth. She coloured with anger, and crushed the note in her hand. Did he guess what conflicting thoughts were wrestling in her mind? Why should she throw away the tangible advantages of a good "position" for the sake of a chimera connected with this man, who showed so clearly that he despised her; whose contemptuous trifling, whose cold, scornful scrutiny taught her every day how hopeless was the chance of ever regaining her ascendancy over him; yet this was the question which had kept her awake half the night, for she knew that the hour was at hand in which she must pronounce her own fate. Last evening it had been different; the determination to worst her enemies, to succeed, in spite of all opposition, had enabled her to enact the part she had found it convenient to assume.

After all, he was a well-looking, clever fellow, likely to prosper in the world, entirely devoted to her, and sure to gratify every whim and fancy of his wife's. Many a woman would think herself blessed with less than this. And for her, with a stormy past, which, though irrecoverably buried, as she believed, caused her a certain disquietude at times when she reflected that after all it *was* possible that Olivia, at the eleventh hour, might betray her; for her, I say, was not the prospect far too hopeful a one to be allowed to melt away? It rested with her whether it should do so. Last evening she had felt resolute that it should not. Afterwards had come the reaction. She had enjoyed her triumph before Olivia, before Westbrook, before them all; there could be no reasonable doubt on any

one's mind that she had but to pronounce the word in order to become Rupert's wife. Yet now, at the last moment, she shrank from pronouncing it.

Did any thought of Olivia's eloquent appeal, any reluctance to inflict on the woman who had once stood by her so nobly in the hour of need, that final wound which, as she well knew, would sever brother and sister for life — did any such considerations cross her mind that night? If so, they but left their shadows in passing, for when the morning came she was almost as undecided as ever.

She sat there demurely, her eyes upon her plate, cutting up her bread in little strips and dipping them into her egg, while she thought over the great question of her life. It was the fashion of the house, several of the guests being habitually late, for any one to leave the table who felt disposed. Clara was in no hurry this morning, and Mrs. Pomfret sat on, waiting, but in no benevolent frame of mind, the coming of Lady Caerlavrock. Rupert's half hour was past, when her ladyship at last made her appearance, bringing with her very favourable tidings of Lord Dumberly. The doctors had said there was no reason why he should not be moved to London the following day. Clara heard, and gathered up the crumbs from her apron. Presently she rose quietly and left the room. She took up a parasol from the hall table and slowly descended the terrace steps. What should she say to him? Could she not temporise yet a little longer? The coronet was clearly out of reach; she foresaw that she would never be admitted inside the paralysed man's doors, for Lady Caerlavrock had not disguised during the last few days her combined dread and disdain of

the little woman whom her brother delighted to honour. As to Westbrook, Clara's thoughts were as gall and wormwood whenever they turned in that direction. Oh! if she could only forget that man, how easy it would all be! She was in a phase of mind this morning when it seemed harder than ever. Now that her facile conquest over Rupert was complete, its value, in her eyes, was lessened. Would it not be possible to temporise a little longer?

He was pacing one of the narrow vineyard terraces as she entered it, and came towards her rapidly. His pale face, and the anxious yet resolute expression it wore, instantly struck her. Had something gone amiss? What was it?

"I looked forward, Clara, this morning," he began, "to have heard from you a definite confirmation of my hopes; you remember my last words last night? Well, it is to beg of you to answer me first, another question, that I have asked you to meet me here."

"Good heavens! Mr. Marston, what is it?"

"Since we parted last night I have been hearing a strange and very sad story of your past life." (She started, but regained her composure almost immediately.)

"I ask you to let me hear this story from your own lips; that is to say, if you care for me enough to marry me. Otherwise, of course, I have no right to demand it. Only if you speak, speak openly and without reserve. If you still love this fellow, say so. God knows my heart is full of pity for you. You have been sorely tried; I am sure of it. But before I make you my wife, you must trust me, Clara, fully — implicitly, and then, so help me God! I will trust *you*. Tell me that you once loved this — this blackguard, but that you

love him no longer, and I'll believe you. I care nothing for what the world says. I know how cruelly unjust it is towards women — while more than merciful to us men. I love you, Clara, better, far better, than all else, and I am willing to give up sister and friends, and country if necessary, for your sake."

Clara's pale face was down-bent. It had come at last, then, in spite of all her successes, in spite of her belief that the past was irrevocably buried. The terrible secret had been ripped open and the worst was known. Her heart said bitterly in the words of the Psalmist, "It is mine adversary who hath done this;" and all the spirit of antagonism, the resolution to conquer in spite of everything, was roused within her. Yet she could not but feel touched by the generosity of this man's love, who, now that he knew her story, was willing to wipe away the past and forsake all for her. She laid her hand upon his arm, and tears (let us think them genuine tears) sprang into her eyes. And yet she could not bring herself to speak the truth.

"Oh! Mr. Marston, how much too good you are for me. How few men would say words of pity and consolation to a woman placed as I am. How can you ask if I have any feeling for a man who has treated me as Mr. Westbrook has? If I have submitted to his presence here it is because I have felt obliged, by my position, to do so. Can you wonder if I have sought to keep my miserable story a secret from every one? I doubted even *your* generous heart being able to forgive it; though before pledging myself to be your wife, of course I meant to tell you. But now that, alas! you have heard it from others, will you, indeed,

believe me? I will tell you all, dear Mr. Marston, and if you can then forgive me, if you can then ask me to be yours, I will, by the devotion of my life, endeavour that your noble trust and oblivion of the terrible past shall be in some measure rewarded." She hesitated an instant and wiped her tears away as she glanced up. "It was Olivia, I suppose, who, moved by a sister's love —"

He stopped her. "Olivia has told me nothing. She is not even aware that I know this, Clara. No matter how it reached me; I come to you before I speak to any other human being on the subject. It is one that only concerns us two. If you will only say that your infatuation for this heartless scoundrel is utterly past, I will believe you, Clara, and I take God to witness that nothing shall come between us two."

Then, with the tears raining once more down her soft fair cheeks (and how heartless must be the man who remains unmoved by a woman's tears!) she poured out her story, true enough in its facts, but like most personal narration, viewed with a strong light and shade thrown on it from that side on which the narrator holds his lamp. She spoke of her extreme youth, of her cold and careless husband, of the temptations amid which she had been thrown, of their poverty, of Julian's ardent and relentless pursuit. She told him how Julian had urged her to leave her husband, and had sworn that he would marry her — how in her husband's rapidly failing health, she had shrunk from taking this step, while, in an unguarded hour, she unfortunately yielded to her seducer; but she said not a word of the fear of the world which had withheld her from elopement, when she had felt that a few months, at furthest,

must render her free. And while she dealt in passionate invective against him whom she called "the cause of all this evil," she implied, as distinctly as any words could convey, that all love for Westbrook was since dead within her. She spoke, as she had spoken to Olivia, of his conduct after her husband's death, and of all she had suffered; and so far spoke the truth. But she could not bring herself, now, when it rested with her to triumph over her enemies, in spite of their machinations against her — she could not bring herself to confess to the blind, mad passion to which she was still a victim. Why should she? Who would ever know it but herself? Why was she to ruin her prospects for "an idea?" She drew a touching picture of her life with Mrs. Crosbie, whom she described, perhaps justly, as a hard straight-laced old woman, who would have turned her into the street if she had learnt her niece's disgrace.

"Can you blame me very much if I sought to conceal it?" she said. "No one knew of the child's existence. My husband, when dying, wrote to my old aunt — the only relation living I had in the world, saying that he left me childless, and charging her to look after me, as I was too young to be allowed to live alone. He had nothing to leave me, and I had nothing but what I could earn, which was little enough then. Had I refused to live with Mrs. Crosbie, had I openly acknowledged the child, my character would have been lost, and I must have starved, or gone upon the streets. Can you blame me very, very much? It was wrong — alas! I feel it now — I should have braved everything, and have owned the child, but I hadn't the moral courage. You see it was terrible,

facing my old aunt: and having once concealed the fact, it became more and more difficult. You think me very wicked? Yes, you are right! You cannot blame me more bitterly than I have blamed myself. I am unworthy to be your wife, Rupert."

Two hours after this scene was being enacted in the Vineyard, Olivia and Warwick Milton were alone in the library. She looked eagerly into his face while he told her all he had done, down to his interview with Rupert the night before, and he was repaid by the look of intense love and gratitude that met him.

"Oh! Warwick, I can't tell you what a relief this has been to my mind. I have been so miserable at his not knowing! Latterly, sometimes, I have thought I must break my oath, and tell him, since *she* wouldn't. But now that his eyes are opened——"

"His eyes are *not* opened, unfortunately, Olivia. He believes that she has been more sinned against than sinning. He will not give her up."

"Impossible! You don't mean that he will marry her, now that he knows what she is?"

"I do. He has just told me so. She has confessed everything to him, and persuaded him that she is very much to be pitied. She has also persuaded him, I suppose, that she is really attached to him."

"Ah! If I could only think that! But I know Clara too well now. It is only a game of cards with her, and she plays the best in her hand——that's all! Poor Rupert! What a future lies before him! To think that he, who was always so sensitive of anything touching a woman's fair fame, should, knowingly, take such a wife as Clara! Well, thank God that, at least, he *does* know all."

“Yes, and is prepared to brave the world. He said to me: ‘Of course, holding the opinion you do of Clara, I am prepared to hear that you refuse to allow Olivia, when she becomes your wife, to associate with mine. I shall grieve very much if this be so; but I take the scriptural view of a man’s choosing his wife, that he must give up father and mother, and all, and cleave to her alone, who is to be one flesh with him. As to other people, what they think or say weighs with me very little. I value the world’s opinion at what it is worth.’ Thus, you see, he has come to his decision, as he himself said, not in the sudden heat of passion, but after a night of calm reflection. He got her to confess everything to him this morning; as far as I can gather, she made a very clean breast of it, and, in his infatuation, he is resolved to marry her. I have only one thing left to do now; to get Westbrook out of the house as quickly as possible. When I point out the state of the case, of course he will see the necessity of going at once. Your brother almost foams at the mouth when he speaks of him. Of course he sees, for the sake of madame’s reputation, if for nothing else, how extremely foolish it would be to have a violent scene with the fellow; but his exasperation is so great that I couldn’t answer for the consequences, if they remained in the same house.”

“Pray go at once then, Warwick. I know Rupert, so well; I dread their meeting. The air, I think, will feel lighter when that man is out of the house.”

At luncheon, Rupert (by Warwick’s advice) was again absent. Clara was there, inwardly radiant and triumphant, under the veil of her modest demeanour. She talked of charity-schools to Mr. Harrington, and

of her own humble efforts in "the field." He remarked, afterwards, that she was certainly a very sweet young woman, and he didn't wonder that so many of these young fellows were smitten. Yet, in spite of this admirable piece of acting, her adversaries read aright the gleaming eye and heightened colour which told of the strong inward excitement attending her recent victory. By-and-by Westbrook appeared, and, in a few constrained words, informed Mrs. Pomfret that a telegram just received would oblige him to return to London that evening. Clara's cheek turned white and red by turns; and, this time, Warwick and Olivia were very far from reading those outward signs correctly.

It had been a golden morning; it was now turning to a wet afternoon. From the library window, where the ladies stood after luncheon, they saw the fine steady rain gathering from the hills around, and softly falling into the water beneath them.

"There is no hope of our getting out," said Mrs. Pomfret. "Have you sent for a fly to take you to the station, Julian?"

He replied that he didn't mind the rain. He meant to walk. His servant would follow, with his things, by a later train. Clara slipped from the room unobserved. She was in a fever. Her little fingers trembled as she stood in the hall, and listened, and then hurriedly fastened a cloak around her, took an umbrella from the stand, and passed out swiftly by a side door into the shrubbery. There was a path she knew of, which intersected, at no great distance from the house, the direct road to the station. Why was she going to waylay him? What did she hope for?

What could she possibly expect from him? She could scarcely tell herself; she only knew that she must, *must* see him once again, and alone. She had triumphed over her enemies now; she had succeeded, in spite of them all, in securing to herself a home and a respectable name and position. She was going to be the wife of another man — a man for whom she cared nothing; she had resolved to sacrifice herself; and she must see Julian once — only once more — she must make one last appeal to him before she took that irrevocable step. It was as a frenzy that possessed her: she knew, in her equivocal position, the danger of what she was doing, and she dared it. She rushed along, under the dripping branches, until she came to a place where the path touched the border of the lake, and emerged, a few yards further, upon the carriage drive. Here, under the shadow of a beech, she took her station, motionless, and listening for the footfall she knew so well, and which she heard presently upon the wet gravel.

Rupert, too, in that same hour, was watching the rain from his window on the upper floor, as he leant out upon both elbows, smoking his cigar. His thoughts were not with the rain, poor fellow, but fixed, with a tension which was almost painful, on one sole object; and as he gazed absently into the shrubbery below, he started, when he suddenly beheld the small, grey-cloaked figure he would have known among a thousand, glide out at a side door, and disappear among the trees. Where could she be going in such weather? He flung away his cigar, and sprang to his feet. He had resolved to keep his room until Westbrook was

gone, but now, had not his good genius guarded him, he would assuredly have encountered the man whom he desired so passionately to punish, under circumstances which could hardly fail to have produced some dire consequence. As it was (the trifles of life are ever interwoven closely with its tragedy and pathos), Aunt Clo waylaid him on the stairs with a string of troublesome questions, from which he could not escape for several minutes. Then he could not find his hat in the hall, and lost some time in looking for it. Finally, Mrs. Pomfret appeared upon the scene, and kept him, chafing at the delay, while she lamented over "dear Julian's" sudden recall to London, "with his corney, which we shall all miss so much of an evening."

It was thus that Rupert's good genius saved him.

What passed between those two in that short quarter of an hour, under the wet trees by the water's edge, no one has ever known — no one now, probably, will ever know. Julian was leaving Milton Abbey, exasperated at the failure of his life, lately. Not only had he lost the only woman whom he would ever have cared to make his wife; his vanity had been sorely wounded, and now received the sharpest stroke of all, when he learnt that his secret sins had been brought to light. He was leaving his uncle's house with rage at heart, and ready to wreak it on the first object he came upon; but calm and self-contained to all outward appearance. How in abject supplication Clara abased herself, as she had never before done, to this man; how his relentless sarcasms smote the unhappy woman who, amid all her folly and wickedness, had retained one paramount affection, which neither injury nor con-

tempt had ever completely alienated; how she retaliated in bitter reproaches; until, with cruel scornful words, he finally cut short the interview — all this, we may, indeed, divine, but the story of what passed was never told.

A few minutes later, Rupert, walking rapidly along the dripping shrubbery, came to the water's edge, where the pathway met the carriage road. There, prone among the sedges and reeds, where she had fallen insensible, lay Clara; the rain beating upon the white upturned face, without recalling any consciousness; the cloak and gold hair drenched; one little hand clasped tight round a miniature that hung about her neck.

He called to her, no reply came; he lifted her like a child, and bore her in his arms to a summer-house hard by; he fetched water in his hand, and dashed it in her face; then he unclenched and chafed the white rigid little hands. In doing so, he could not but see the face of the miniature she held so tight.

The face was that of Julian Westbrook. Beside it, under the same glass, was a withered forget-me-not.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Riven Chain.

SHE opened her eyes, and closed them again, with a shudder; then she tried to raise her head, which still rested on his shoulder.

"Leave me," she said, feebly. "I can get home. I had rather be alone."

He made no reply, but kept fanning her with his hat. Even now he would not suspect her, though a dark shadow had fallen suddenly upon him, and his heart was sore oppressed. He tried to drive away the suggestions that would arise; he repeated to himself that she would explain all; he shut his eyes resolutely, for the moment, to all save the work of restoring her to consciousness; but I will not say that he did not suffer keenly all the time.

Presently she sat up, and with her own hands put back the hair from her face. The rain was coming down faster than ever; it poured off the eaves of the little summer-house where they sat. She stared out blindly into the rain, not seeing it, or anything but the images which her own shattered slow-returning thoughts brought with them. She raised her hand to her neck, and feeling the miniature hanging out, she thrust it quickly back into her dress. Then she turned her face away from him, and buried it in both her hands awhile. Of course he had discovered everything. There was no longer anything to be gained by concealment; even if she had not felt too miserable to try, just then.

"Why do you not leave me?" she moaned, without uncovering her face.

"Because you are not in a fit state to be left. Try and calm yourself. I won't talk to you."

"Of what use is that? You know all. I fear your reproaches all the same."

"I know nothing, Clara."

"Let me speak, then — let me speak to you now, lest I should be tempted afterwards to remain silent — to deceive you again. I did wrong in accepting your hand, Mr. Marston. You are free. I loved another man. In spite of everything, I *love him still*. He has just treated me with greater indignity, greater cruelty than ever — and yet, God help me! I can't hate and despise him as I ought. There: now you know the truth. I'm not fit to be your wife. And now go, please. You can say nothing that I don't know. My conduct has been very bad towards you. I am a wretched woman, struggling for a name and a decent position. That's all I can say in my defence."

Rupert's face went deadly white as she spoke. He set his teeth hard; but he said nothing for some minutes after she had ceased. At last he murmured in a hoarse voice:

"God forgive you for having deceived me, Clara! And yet — and yet I am willing, even now, to believe that it is as the father of your dead child that you have clung, and still cling to the thought of this scoundrel — that you have looked on him as your husband, in Heaven's sight; and that in this light you have shrunk from forgetting him — from putting him away completely — as he deserves. You deceive yourself when you say that you still *love him*: it isn't

possible. I say no more. You are excited now. In the course of time you may feel differently. Can you stand? — take my arm. We will walk slowly home."

She did as she was told, like a child. She said nothing, but with a pale impassive face, rose, and leant upon his arm, and walked, in silence, back to the Abbey. As they entered the door, she managed to get his hand in hers, and pressed it gently.

"God bless you. You are a good man," she whispered; "you deserve a better fate. Oh, how different my life might have been had I only known you four years ago! Good night. I shall not come down to dinner." She gave him one look back, which he remembered long afterwards, and glided up the great oak stairs, with her dripping dress, and long gold hair hanging about her shoulders, like the wraith of some drowned woman revisiting her home. Rupert gazed after her till she was out of sight. Then he turned away, with a great sigh that came from the very bottom of the poor fellow's heart.

He felt miserable and hopeless. He shrank from meeting Warwick or Olivia, as though he must betray himself; for how could he appear unchanged? — he, to whom all acting, all dissimulation was foreign — while his heart was a prey to the bitter thoughts which forced themselves upon him. No man who was not absolutely mad could doubt that she had spoken the truth; and yet his passion blinded him almost to this point. He caught, as a drowning man catches at a straw, to the possibility of her unsaying to-morrow what she had confessed to-day. She was excitable — impulsive — her feelings towards Westbrook, fraught with remorse and self-reproach, were variable and confused. She

was liable, under the influence of emotion, to deceive herself—she did not know her own heart. It was thus he sought, with all the special pleading of passion, to argue the point against that clear-sighted advocate, his common sense.

Far into the twilight, gathering round the Abbey in thick mists, through the fine silent rain, she sat in her small upper chamber, motionless, alone; her head bowed forward in her hands, her elbows resting on the table; the long hair, the wet gown, still clinging about her. Her little maid came in, with a white dress upon her arm: Clara, without raising her head, sent her away. Upon the table lay an open letter—the one she had received that morning—she had now re-read it, weighing its contents more deliberately than she had before done. How should she answer it? Upon this her future fate would turn.

She knew well how great her influence still was over Rupert, and the exercise of this power was not without attractions for her. She had but to go to him, and say, "Forget the folly I uttered just now. If the interview with my poor child's father disturbed my reason for awhile, if in recalling memories of the past, some of the old tenderness awoke in me again for a moment, and I mistook a passing emotion for a permanent sentiment, can you not forgive me? I have been sinful: I am still a weak, wayward creature. Take me, with all my imperfections on my head, if you will. I am yours." She had but to say this, and he would joyfully open his arms to her; that she well knew. The very foolishness of the man's faith touched her. Had he been more difficult to deceive, to cajole, and to recapture, her indomitable love of conquest

would, perhaps, have risen once more within her. As it was, when she turned from self-contemplation, from weighing the possible future of gratified ambition, solitary and friendless, which was opened to her, with the devotion of a true-hearted man, and the solid comforts of a peaceful home; from thoughts of her own passionate disappointments and frustrated hopes, to the thought of this faithful lover, who, undeterred by the knowledge of her past life, nay, even now, undaunted by her avowal, was ready to take her to himself, her heart was softened. In that hour, Olivia's words — the sister's pleading for her brother — came back to Clara, I believe, with redoubled force. She had put them away from her, as she had the power of doing most things that were painful to her, at most times. She had tried not to see Olivia's eyes the night before, and again that morning; she had said to herself that it was a duel between them, in which every weapon had fallen into Olivia's hand, and Clara's own superior skill and strategy had disarmed her adversary. Now her heart, in its abandonment, spoke a language nearer to the truth. Such moments are there in the lives of all. They are generally transient, for conscience, when habitually hoodwinked, cannot be expected to stand the hard searching light of day for very long at a time. I think it probable that Clara felt this; that she knew herself well enough not to trust to her own spasmodic strength for standing upright against the next incoming tide of vanity, and selfish care, and wordly consideration. There was the letter open before her. Let her answer it, and by doing so, decide her fate now, beyond recall.

The post went out at seven. A few minutes be-

fore that hour she hurriedly scrawled a line or two, rang for her maid, and gave her letter for the bag. Having once taken her resolution, she no longer hesitated, nor turned back. Between eleven and twelve o'clock that night she had an interview with Mrs. Pomfret, and one with Olivia.

The servant who brought in Rupert's hot water for shaving the next morning, brought him, with it, a letter.

"Madame St'lino desired this to be given to you, sir. She's just hoff."

"Off! Where? What do you mean?"

"By the eight hup train, sir."

He asked no more questions, but tore open the letter.

"Dear Mr. Marston, — dear, very dear to me as a faithful friend, — this is to wish you good-bye, perhaps for ever; certainly for years. I write this late at night: early to-morrow I leave Milton Abbey, because I particularly wish *not* to see you again. I do not deserve your forgiveness. I cannot bear your reproaches, even if their only language should be your eyes. Yes; I have come to the determination to accept a life of further toil and solitude, rather than drag you down by linking my lot with yours, when I have nothing to give in return for such devotion. Ah! do not be too hard on me in your heart, if I have tried to believe myself — tried to make you believe, that I loved you enough to marry you. I am one of those women born to inspire more passions than they can return — and so I suppose it will be to the end. I gave my heart away once; now I think in its place there is a stone. And

yet, at this moment, I feel only too keenly all your goodness, all your forbearance towards me, and how I have repaid it. But it is not too late for the mischief to be repaired. You are young: you will very soon forget one who has only crossed your path to cast her dark shadow there. You deserve a better wife than I could ever have been; may you soon find her.

"I have accepted an engagement to go to Australia, to sing there in operas; afterwards, on to Calcutta and Madras, I believe — perhaps all round the world. I have no ties in England now — nothing to make me regret leaving it, or to make me desire to return: everything is dead to me here! But in the excitement of a successful career I can still delight, and perhaps drown some vain regrets. At all events I, who know myself, believe that I can be happier in leading such a life than I could be at the domestic fireside of any man — now. There was a time when it might have been otherwise; but it is useless to refer to that.

"I have seen Olivia. I have bidden her good-bye. I have received her forgiveness. I have only now to ask for yours, in your *heart*, not with your lips; for I must beg you, as a favour, not to try and see me, during the short interval that will elapse before I leave England. If I ever return — a poor battered middle-aged creature, and find you the happy father of a family, you will thank me for what I am now doing; and this, which now wounds you, will then, alas! be my only claim to your regard. That you may be happy and prosperous is the sincere wish of

"Yours ever most gratefully,

"CLARA STELLINO."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Postscript.

I HAVE little more to add. The events herein recorded took place so recently, that, in the literal sense of the word, the *lives* of the chief actors in this story are probably not yet half run out. Yet, in another sense, they have lived their lives. The crisis, the turning-point in each, is past. Years, which will bring to them their share of joys and sorrows, can show them nothing above or beyond the top of the hill which they have reached.

Olivia has reigned long enough at the old Manor to have three noble boys. Mr. Pomfret still lives at the Abbey, for, of his seven years' lease, two have yet to run; but after that, Warwick Milton has promised his wife that he will reoccupy the home of his ancestors. Indeed his antipathy to the place, his dread of its old miserable associations, has worn away under the influence of a happy peaceful home. He can bear now to stand in the grim library, looking out of its mulioned windows on to the fish-pond, without living over again the wretched scenes which embittered his life for nearly twenty years. He and Olivia amuse themselves by planning all manner of improvements in the somewhat gloomy old building, whereby colour and sunlight shall be introduced, and drive away such shadows as linger yet around the walls. Lady Milton is a more popular person than Olivia Marston ever was.

Some one said of her that she had never been a girl — that she must have been born a woman, by which, no doubt, was meant to be indicated the indefinable something, which certainly was not hardness, nor boldness, nor self-confidence, but a certain absence of the girlish, blushful element, and the indifference to admiration which is never quite attractive to men. The composure of her manner befits the young matron charmingly now, so those say who never felt as much at their ease with her formerly as they did with more chaffy, flirty young ladies. However that may be, it was these very qualities, I know, that first attracted Warwick Milton, when everything like women's ordinary ways, their pretty invitations and seductions of demeanour, were utterly abhorrent to him. No other kind of woman would have been able to work in him, without effort of her own, that revolution which she accomplished. He made his election, and he has not found himself deceived.

Olivia's anxiety about Rupert is now at an end. He never saw Clara after that afternoon when he watched her vanishing, like a wraith, up the stairs, with her dripping locks and drenched garments, and she turned her face towards him for a moment: he never heard from her after that last letter. For nearly two years he abjured all society; he worked harder than ever; he occasionally ran down to the Manor for a few days to see his sister; and then generally avoided the Pomfrets and other neighbours as much as possible. Mary, in the meantime, quite recovered her health and her spirits, but she showed no inclination to fall in love again. Kate was married long since to young Stanridge, and as happy, on the whole, as the generality

of people are. But the example did not seem to fire her sister with a desire to go and do likewise. She had several "good" offers, as they are called; she was a very popular girl in London, and scarcely less so in the country; yet after being out four or five years, she still remained unmarried. Her friendship with Lady Milton was as fast as ever, but Rupert's name seldom passed between them, and except by some rare chance, he and Mary never met.

About two years after Olivia's marriage, however, she began to be apprehensive that her brother's resolute avoidance of society would grow into a fixed habit, which nothing would ever break, unless measures were soon taken to rouse him. "He will become as *sauvage* as you were, Warwick," she said to her husband. "He has had time, now, to recover from the blow. He must not be allowed to brood over it any longer. I wish I could get him to fall in love with Mary."

"What a match-maker you are," said her husband, smiling. "Those things are not to be *got* — as I should have thought you knew by this time."

It ended after a great deal of persuasion, in his going abroad with them for the winter; and at Rome, little by little, they induced him, as Aunt Clo would say, "to mix." More than eighteen months have passed since then; he has risen considerably in the house of Claxton, with a large increase of salary; he no longer avoids society, either in London or the country; he has, during this past summer, been staying three or four times at the Abbey. And now, at last, even as I write these words, the news reaches me that Olivia's long cherished match-making scheme is actually crowned

with success! Not suddenly, as when his passionate gaze first flashed upon Clara Elliston, but by slow degrees, his eyes have been opened to the sweet tender graces of the girl he so long overlooked. The engagement has met with a little opposition from Mrs. Pomfret, who, to use her own expression, "naturally looked higher;" but she always liked Rupert personally, and Mr. Pomfret gave so resolute and cordial a consent at once, that the good lady saw it was useless to say anything more. I am told that she derives considerable comfort from the reflection that several sons of lords have recently entered merchants' houses, and have gone on the Stock Exchange; and though I am afraid in her heart she would have preferred an idle scion of one of those noble families for a son-in-law to the able and industrious man whom Mary has so long loved, yet she wisely makes the best of things; and as she has many good points, in spite of her small vulgarities, I make no doubt but that she and Rupert will get on very well together. People wonder, as they always do in such cases, "why on earth Mr. Marston didn't marry Miss Pomfret long ago, if he meant to do it? They've known each other for years. It's so very odd!" and the world considers itself aggrieved and defrauded by the discovery that two persons whom it never thought of coupling together — touching whom such a word as "flirtation," even, had never been breathed — suddenly see fit to become man and wife. It is against all rule. If such things are to be tolerated, what is to become of those lynx-eyed guardians of society who watch, retail, and speculate on all our actions?

Mr. Tharpe was seriously ill some time since: it was thought he would die; and there were not wanting

people who frankly said that, in their opinion, the world would be well rid of an intolerable nuisance. He disappointed them by recovering. But whether this sickness unto death had softened him, or that his son's unremitting devotion during this long illness produced the effect; or, what is still more probable, that Algy's steady development of a capacity for business soothed the father's irritated vanity, and brought him to think, by degrees, that his son was not such a fool as he had believed; whether either, or a combination, of these wrought the beneficial change in their relations, I know not. Certain it is, that though Mr. Tharpe is still sarcastic at times, though Algy still knocks over more wine-glasses and breaks more chairs than any man of my acquaintance, they get on very well together. The affection which no unkindness has alienated, the sweet temper, the honest, manly nature of the son are worth more, as I think Mr. Tharpe now begins to see, than the brilliant parts of many of the young man's contemporaries.

Julian Westbrook is still unmarried, and very little changed. No retributive fate, in the shape of a termagant wife, has as yet befallen him. But he is not a happy man: he is restless, dissatisfied; and as years go on, and the aliment on which his vanity has always fed, is less profusely offered, when the charm of youth and good looks is fading, and the hardness of a selfish nature crops out more and more, I do not think his lot very enviable, though no stern Nemesis has interrupted a prosperous career with any tangible afflictions.

Miss Pringle has *not* established a permanent abiding place for herself at the Manor; but she is very

often invited there, when Mr. Harrington and one or two more whist players can come to make up a rubber for her. Warwick is very long-suffering now of the foibles of his wife's aunt. Age, which mellows good wine, and only sours the thin bodiless fruit of the vintage, has softened and ripened my friend's character. He is less impatient of women's weaknesses; more credulous of good in human nature. Of Aunt Clo, for instance, he never forgets that, according to her lights, she was always kind and fond of Olivia, and he submits to the frivolous old lady with an indulgence which it is marvellous to behold.

It is only left for me to speak of one other person who has played a prominent part in this story. Nothing has been heard of Clara for some time. She is still abroad; "starring" it somewhere in South America, it is supposed. She has had great success in various parts of the world, and is said to have amassed a considerable fortune. There was a rumour at one time that she was going to be married to an Indian prince; and, again, at another, to a rich South American planter. Neither of these reports appear to have been verified; at least, no confirmation of her marriage has ever reached England. Occasionally some paragraph, transcribed from a colonial into one of the London papers, has informed those who still feel an interest in her fate that she has had an "ovation" in such and such a city, where the horses were taken from her carriage, and she was well nigh crushed under the weight of bouquets on the stage. While all this lasts, no doubt she is right: it suits her better than any other sort of life would do. Unfortunately, it cannot last for

ever. Even now it may have come to an end; for it is some months since we heard of her. Sooner or later, at all events, the change must come; the clear voice become unlovely, as a blackbird's at midsummer, the sunny locks grow thin, and the fair face lose its roundness. And then — when the beginning of the end comes — what then?

I like to suggest, at least, some profitable reflection as I write the last page of this story, throughout which but few attempts will be found to improve the occasion, and draw direct lessons from the virtues or backslidings of the persons whom I have written about. Those who demand that such lessons be placed, like sign-posts, before them, pointing out in the finest Roman capitals, whither such and such conduct leads, will ask what moral is herein conveyed. My answer is, there is none. None to those who cannot see that life has its great, unalterable lessons, deeper, broader, more multiform than any which some special fiction or reality appears to illustrate. Each individual existence has within itself a whole world. The further we can penetrate that world, ascending its high places, where the light of heaven shines brightest, and piercing, so far as may be, its intricate depths, the more are we likely to gain in that wisdom, love, and tolerance which grows with the knowledge of our kind. A man may keep all the law and the prophets, and yet be but a poor ensample. On the other hand, we have a Great Authority for believing that, in the secret heart of publicans and sinners, the graces of charity and humility may grow sometimes more abundantly than in the lives of just immaculate men. It is a very complex

skein of black and white, from which the many real stories around us are spun every day. To disentangle with what care I could the various threads in one such story, is the task which I set myself, and which I have but feebly accomplished.

THE END.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

THE
OFFICE OF THE
SECRETARY OF THE
NAVY
WASHINGTON
D. C.

PRINTING OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY
WASHINGTON
D. C.

Aïdé, Hamilton

The Marstons a novel

Bd.: 2

Leipzig 1868

P.o.angl. 6 p-4/5

urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10744574-6